



Geneva's Legacy

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Dedication

I wish to dedicate this book to you the reader. It is for you I write. Please enjoy the movies of my mind. I would love to hear from you.

Payton Lee



'Way out in the land of the setting sun,
Where the wind blows wild and free,
There's a lovely spot, just the only one
That means home sweet home to me.

If you follow the old Kit Carson trail,
Until desert meets the hills,
Oh you certainly will agree with me,
It's the place of a thousand thrills.

Chorus

Home, means Nevada, Home, means the
hills,
Home, means the sage and the pines.
Out by the Truckee's silvery rills,
Out where the sun always shines,
There is the land that I love the best,
Fairer than all I can see.
Right in the heart of the golden west
Home, means Nevada to me.

Whenever the sun at the close of day,
Colors all the western sky,
Oh my heart returns to the desert grey
And the mountains tow'ring high.



Where the moon beams play in shadowed glen,
With the spotted fawn and doe,
All the live long night until morning light,
Is the loveliest place I know.

Chorus

Home, means Nevada, Home, means the
hills,
Home, means the sage and the pines.
Out by the Truckee's silvery rills,
Out where the sun always shines,
there is the land that I love the best,
Fairer than all I can see.
Right in the heart of the golden west
Home, means Nevada to me.

Prologue



Dublin, Ireland 1834

“Yer crazy, lad! Taking on board a ship as cabin boy,” Michael ranted. “Yer don’t know what ye be doing. The sailors are a cruel lot they are. Yer could be flogged to death, or worse. I’ve heard tales ya know.”

Grady looked up to his uncle Michael McGillinen. Uncle Mike had been like a second father to him. When Grady came to Dublin to seek his fortune it was Uncle Mike that took him in. Grady’s father, Ayden, had recognized the restlessness of his youngest son. He sent Grady to Dublin to find his way with the blessing of his father and mother, Kerry McGillinen. Grady’s eldest brother Ryan was already married with two children and settled on his small sheep farm near Fanore. Patrick the next brother was married, expecting their first child and living on the sheep farm with his father. Dwayne had joined the priesthood to the delight of their mother, and Sean was studying to be a teacher. He was the only child with wanderlust. He studied geography and read incessantly as a child. His favorite readings were stories and tales of the Wild West opened by Lewis and Clark’s expedition. He read about the Indians and the Shoshone bird woman known as Sacagewea. He read about the open land, rich soil, gold, silver, hope, mountainous expanse, and most importantly freedom of the new land.

Grady knew he was too much of a rebel to live, as he needed in the oppressive rule of the British. He first met Captain Donahue as he waited on the tables of the pub he worked for at night. During the day he slept and pursued his desire for learning about machinery, ledgers, law, and everything he could learn about husbandry. Grady recognized his need for knowledge as a strong addiction that he might never quell.

Captain Donahue was reminded of the son he lost only a year ago in an accident. Donahue talked to Grady and filled his head with tales of his voyages and all the exotic places he had sailed to. Every day Grady listened raptly to the tales. He learned to like the captain. The crew under him also visited the pub. Grady learned from that crew that Captain Donahue was a fair and honest captain. He held



firm discipline by loyalty and not severe punishment or fear. The last cabin boy was promoted to seaman and now Donahue would be taking on a new cabin boy. They would be sailing first on the Atlantic to the Americas and then around to the Pacific to trade with the new Americans in whale oil and furs. They would see the Sandwich Islands and the beautiful native women all the sailors talked about with lusty laughs.

"I should be sending for yer Da! He'll flail me alive when he learns I did not stop ya from doing such a fool thing," Michael complained.

"Da will understand," Grady soothed. "He and Mama knew I was born with the wander lust in me blood."

"Saints preserve me. Yer Mama, Kerry will never forgive me."

"I've got to be going," Grady smiled cheerfully. "I'll write when I have the chance."

Grady turned and waved once again to his Uncle Michael and walked toward the docks. He had signed as cabin boy for two years. He would learn everything he could from the sailors. Then he would leave the ship at the Port of San Francisco. He would go to the fur fields of western America and perhaps do a bit of mining along the way. It was a great life he planned. In two years he would be sixteen and a man.

Chapter 1



“So we are here at last, Grady McGillinen,” Gus Bartley complained. “What do you intend to do in this blasted noisy and filthy place?”

“You didn’t have to come, Gus.”

“And leave you and your fortune unattended? Someone has to protect you from yourself and your wealth. There are woman in places like this that would bleed you to death. I ain’t worked with ya all these years to let you be taken by a loose woman. Didn’t yer Mama ever tell you about women like that?”

Grady laughed boisterously. Gus Bartley was an old man of forty some when they joined fortunes on the fateful day he took his pay from Captain Donahue, bought a gun, horse, rifle, saddle and food staples. He said his goodbyes to the crew and met Gus Bartley in the hotel. Gus was talking about the furs and trading he did up in Utah Territory. Gus was a blow hard, but obviously a good tracker. Grady learned a lot about people and the importance of trade and partnership while a cabin boy aboard Donahue’s ship. Gus needed money for supply and Grady needed a wise woodsman. The partnership was fruitful. The forty-year-old man learned a lot from the young sixteen year old boy man. Grady learned a lot from the wood wise old man. Their partnership brought success and wealth

“What are we doing in this big ugly city?” Gus demanded stretching his neck in the celluloid collar. I feel like my neck is about to be stretched by a necktie party.”

“Gus, you look great for an old geezer. That new store bought suit makes you look downright handsome,” Grady encouraged.

“I look like a plucked chicken,” Gus groused. “I’m more comfortable and look prettier in my buckskins.”

“You would scare the locals,” Grady grinned. “The city folk in Boston are refined.”

“What’s refined?” Gus questioned.

“Genteel, soft spoken,” Grady replied. “City folk are different.”

“Soft? Oh yeah, soft like in the head,” Gus agreed pointing to his own.

“I’ve business to take care of, Gus,” Grady reminded. “I told you all about it when we first decided to come to Boston.”

“Oh yeah, those investments of yours. Don’t blamed understand that investment paper stuff, but your brains done me good



so far,” Gus conceded. “Let’s buy them dad blamed railroad investment stocks and go on home.”

Grady smiled. Home was no longer Ireland and the McGillinen clan land. Home was his sweet ranch. He and Gus had found the land in between the Cherry Valley and small town growing called Ely. Gus was getting to old to track and the fur business was growing thin. Grady bought the land as an old gold mine that quickly had ran out. It turned out the gold was thin but a rich vein of silver was found. Gus and Grady kept it a secret. They pulled only enough silver out to buy necessity. As the mines surrounding his land gave out, he bought them up increasing his land holdings. The miners needed new grub steaks to follow the gold trails. Grady gave them work. He had them build a large log ranch house on his land. He kept building on to the ranch house, as more miners needed jobs. Soon he had barns, stables, and servant cabins. Gus and Grady agreed to take more of the money and bought horses, cattle, sheep, and even let some miners with their families stay on to farm.

Gus and Grady soon had thriving business trades all over the country and the Mormon settlements. Grady still had a need to grow and he made investments through brokerages in Boston. The investors sent word to Grady to meet the railroad stockbrokers. They preferred face-to-face meetings and agreements. Grady had looked forward to it. His need for more experiences and knowledge lured him to this big metropolitan city. He had been to San Francisco of course, Virginia City, Chicago, and even St. Louis. He still wanted to go to the three great eastern cities. To him New York, Boston, and Washington City would be like visiting London, Paris, and Madrid.

Grady had seen other large cities like Tokyo, Shanghai, and Bombay. He had seen all the oceans and enjoyed the different cultures of many different lands, but America was special to him.

“Gathering wool again?” Gus grumbled. The chills of the Boston Atlantic winds were bothering his aching old bones.

Grady knew immediately that Gus was suffering. “Let’s get into our warm hotel room and get a cup of hot soup.”

“More likely a swig of good whiskey,” Gus brightened. “Do these old bones more good than a drink of some soup.”

“I’ll buy you a good Irish whiskey,” Grady stated taking Gus’s arm and leading him to a hack waiting at the train station. “It will take time for this investment to serve high profit.”



“Oh Ashley, he’s dreamy!” Alyson sighed brushing her younger sister’s hair. “Imagine a Lord like Grant Wessex becoming your beau. Papa must be delighted.”

“He is handsome, I’ll give you that,” Ashley agreed. She turned abruptly and walked to her bed.

“Handsome? That is an understatement, sweet sister. He’s also a bloody British Lord! You’re the envy of your coming out friends.”

“You don’t understand, Alyson. I like him, but that magic isn’t there.”

Alyson put her hands on her hips. “Magic, just what exactly are you expecting?”

“I don’t know *exactly*,” Ashley replied pronouncing the word exactly with emphasis. “Grant is handsome, a British Lord, and a nice man, but I sense he cannot return love. I do believe he loves someone else.”

“Curse this talent for sensing things that we have,” Alyson stated sitting down on the chair in their room. “I sensed it as well, but who couldn’t fall in love with someone as beautiful as my sister. He did dance every one with you at the coming out cotillion. He sent his card and introduction the next day. I just thought he had to be interested.”

“You didn’t fall all over yourself for the men that came courting you,” Ashley reminded.

“You know I’m in love...”

“With a soldier coming up at the academy,” Ashley finished.

Alyson blushed. “Papa is so against cadet Charles Jameson. He doesn’t come from money or bloodlines.”

“Not according to his insufferable parents. Don’t forget you would marry into his family,” Ashley chided. “His parents don’t like you very much either. They want their son to marry a Southern Belle blueblood that they will control. New money people are really difficult. I worry for you just like Papa.”

“Charles and I love each other. We’ll make our love grow and conquer our parents,” Alyson vowed.

“I hope so. I truly do.”

“Audrey is happy with her choice. Papa didn’t like him very much. It turned out well,” Alyson said cheerfully. “Besides we were



talking about you. Papa is pleased with Lord Wessex. He's looking forward to the match. Papa still has properties and investments in England. He wanted at least one of his children to inherit them. How better than a daughter marrying an English Lord?"

"He should marry an English Lord," Ashley grumped.

"I don't think Mamma would like that at all," Alyson chuckled.

"No, I don't think Mamma would like that t'all," Ashley bubbled.

"What wouldn't I like?" Margaret Stuart asked entering her daughters' room with the grace of a swan.

"Seeing your darling daughters married and away," Ashley commented quickly.

"Well, you are right about that. It is difficult enough having Audrey just married and going back and forth between here and New York. These investments are such a busy thing," Margaret said wistfully. "Still my daughters will grow and start families of their own. I should be happy to see my grandchildren. That is what we look forward to when our children grow. Remember how much Grandma and Grandpa enjoyed our visits?"

"Yes, Mamma." The girls replied in unison.

"Your Papa is thrilled with Lord Wessex's pursuit, Ashley," Margaret said quietly taking her youngest daughter's hand. "I feel you are not. I also feel that there is something in Grant's heart that would stand between you and happiness."

"Oh Mamma, I feel so strongly the same way," Ashley cried crawling into her mother's arms.

"Still, Grant pursues his suit and your father is pleased. What shall we do?" Margaret lamented. "Your father will insist upon marriage and I don't believe that would be good for either of you. Grant Wessex is fooling himself in asking for your hand in marriage. I sense he loves another. He would ruin both your lives."

"If he loves another, Mamma, why does he court Ashley?"

"Perhaps because we are American. I remember the frolic Harold caused in England when he announced he was marrying me. The British are quite snobbish you know," Margaret enlightened. "Your father, a heavily titled Lord marrying a common American was accepted like the great England falling into a revolution. Our only hope for happiness was leaving England and living here. Which of course I am ever grateful."



"Mamma, you never told us," Alyson whispered as if someone might hear.

"There never was a need until now," Margaret sighed.

"How can Grant take me to live in England? Surely he must know as an American I would never be accepted," Ashley stated in trepidation."

"With his titles and your titles, perhaps England might have changed a bit," Alyson suggested.

"I do hope that will be true, yet I don't want my daughter to suffer because of some revenge in the mind of Grant Wessex."

Ashley's eyes opened wide. "Revenge? Use me for revenge?"

Margaret regretted sharing her inner feelings immediately. She and Harold were very happy, but in the beginning of their marriage she learned that Harold had started seeing her to start a scandal. He and his father had words about an arranged marriage. Harold stopped it when the ton caught on to Lord Harold seeing the scandalous American heiress. Margaret's father would not be deterred when he learned of the courting of his daughter. They were both forced into the marriage, but in truth they did love and enjoy each other very much. They had a truly happy marriage. Harold was a strict and rigid father, but he loved his girls and wanted to see them happy.

"Perhaps that might be too strong of a word," Margaret replied defensively.

"If you feel it, Mamma, it must be true. I shall call off the courtship. I have other callers," Ashley stated firmly.

"Heavens that will never do. Your Papa is thrilled with Grant Wessex. You might force Papa to do something we all will regret," Margaret argued. "We must hope fate will take a hand."

"Kin we go home now?" Gus grumped standing outside on the boardwalk waiting for a hack. "I jest don't like all this dirty smoke and noise. I miss me mountains and fresh air. We got the agreement and investment ya wanted. It's good and we'll make a passel a money agin. I want to go home. Me old bones is telling me it's time to go home."

"Don't you want to see New York or Washington City? As long as we are here, it would be time to see the great money city, and the capitol of our country," Grady rebutted. "I've been to New York



before. It was some fourteen years ago. I'd surely like to see it again."

"Jest another filthy dirty noisy city if you ask me," Gus complained.

"Think of all those loose women you need to protect me from," Grady quipped.

"Arghhh, get on with it then. We'll see your big ugly city, but Washington City is a bad and evil place. There's too much talk about politics and slavery. Any government that considers slavery acceptable is a sinful evil place," Gus sermonized.

"There are many in Washington City that are against slavery," Grady argued.

"Bah! Them politicians only care about the size of their purses. There will be a war one day and it is going to be about money, not slaves. It's about the industrial Northern States wanting the Southern States commodity," Gus elucidated.

"You are a smart old codger," Grady smiled. Gus never ceased to amaze him. Gus always came across as a cantankerous old goat with little school learning, but he was a deep thinker and a very wise intelligent man.

"Taint hard to put two and two together," Gus answered shyly.

"Isn't that Grant?" Alyson pointed out with a nod toward the opposite side of the street. Alyson and Ashley had spent the day shopping in the exclusive area of Boston.

Grant spotted Ashley and Alyson across the road. He waved cheerfully. He was happy to see Ashley, but he couldn't stop the feelings he had for Celeste. Damn his father for interfering. There was something magic with that young debutante. It drove him crazy and not caring about the ton or propriety he and the sweet young Celeste made love. The day he proposed marriage to his dear Celeste she had disappeared. His father had informed him that the young girl had already been betrothed. Grant went insane and tried to find Celeste. It was then his father shipped him off to America to stop any word of scandal and give Grant time to get over the gel that was far beneath his station.

"This is the time to talk to Grant. Papa is not around to intimidate me. I must end this charade," Ashley whispered to Alyson



while returning Grant's wave. Looking at the busy street Ashley began to cross when it appeared to be clear.

A delivery wagon had not been properly tethered when a child playing in the street with a slingshot accidentally struck the horse's rump with a stone. The horse bolted and careened down the street.

Grady was watching for a hack when he noticed the attractive woman begin to cross the street. Something twisted his guts when he looked at her. He heard shouting up the street. It was a woodsman-heightened awareness of his surroundings that allowed Grady to react so quickly to unusual situations or sounds. He saw the horse and wagon stomping down the street in the direction of the woman crossing. Instinctively he knew she was in the direct path of the runaway horse and wagon. Without a thought Grady darted into the street, grabbed the woman's waist and pulled her back with such force they both fell backward onto the paved street. Grady pulled the woman into his chest. When they fell he took the brunt of the force and knocked the air out of his lungs. The horse and wagon passed them at the same instant missing them by only inches.

Grant had not noticed the wagon until it was too late. He saw the stranger jump out and grab Ashley saving her life.

Alyson was in shock and dropped the packages she was holding when she saw the horse and wagon just miss her sister. She ran into the street where Ashley was still lying on the ground on the top of a stranger. The police were already running to the scene. Grant ran to Ashley's side.

"Ashley, are you all right?" Grant asked worriedly. He knelt beside her.

Ashley was still in a state of shock and quite out of breath. For the first time in her life she understood the word 'vapors'. Her heart was racing and found she couldn't utter a sound.

Grady had a hard time catching his breath, and he knew it wasn't just because of the fall. He had worse falls in the mountains. He was hurt more in fistfights than this little tumble. There in his arms was a woman that he felt a strong magnetic force running through him.

Gus followed the other bystanders around the couple and pushed his way through. "What you do a damn blamed thing like that fer?"



“It seemed prudent,” Grady squeaked still lying on his back and still holding on to this beautiful woman like he didn’t want to let go.

Grant attempted to lift Ashley from the ground and Grady’s arms, “You can release her now, sir.”

“Git up!” Gus ordered his friend. “And take your arms off that gel so the gentleman can help her.”

Grady reluctantly complied. He allowed Gus to help him up and brushed off his new suit. His gut twisted up inside once more when he saw the man holding the woman and talking softly to her. It was obvious he knew her. Was that her husband? His insides twisted harder.

“Ashley, how dreadful. Are you injured?” Grant asked in great concern. He could feel her shaking in his arms.

“We need to get Ashley home. She’s as pale as a haunt,” Alyson said fearfully. “We should have a doctor examine her.”

Grady still sharply attuned to his environment and unhurt other than a bruise or two from the road pavement heard her name, Ashley.

A hack suddenly appeared and Grant signaled it. He put Ashley and Alyson in it. A bystander had picked up Alyson’s packages and placed them in the carriage.

Ashley finally looked at her rescuer. At the same time Grady looked into the carriage to assure his mind that she was fine. Their eyes locked and something pierced into their inner being. Ashley forced words out, “Alyson, get his name. We must thank him.”

“Of course,” Alyson reassured. “Grant, please obtain the man’s name and location. We must thank him properly for saving our Ashley.”

Grant nodded and obtained the necessary information.

Ashley was taken home and put to bed immediately. When Margaret heard what happened she called for a physician. The doctor examined Ashley and assured Margaret her daughter was shaken up but unharmed. Harold came home late that night after several business meetings and ran to his daughter’s room when Margaret informed him of the day’s event.

“Princess,” Harold whispered entering her room. “Have you eaten?”



"I'm fine, Papa," Ashley replied drowsily. She had been sleeping due to the laudanum the doctor had given her. "Mamma made certain I had some broth."

"Good. Good. That's good," Harold repeated. "Princess, when your Mamma told me how close you came....to...." Harold couldn't even say the thought on his mind. He loved his daughters. If anything had happened to any of them, he didn't know if he could survive it. His desire for his children was a perfect life.

"Papa, the man that saved me. We should thank him," Ashley said quietly fighting off the sleep.

"Of course we will," Harold vowed.

"Grant was there. He wrote down the man's name and location," Ashley whispered falling into a deep sleep.

"Don't you worry one bit, Princess," Harold replied choking back his tears. "I'll invite him to dinner and reward him handsomely."

"I thought we were a gittin outta here!" Gus complained. "You ain't hurt and yer sittin here like an old lady."

"Just last minute details."

A knock at the hotel room door ended the conversation. A bellboy stood in the hall. "Mr. Grady McGillinen?"

"I am."

"This is a note for you sir," the boy said smartly.

Grady reached into his coat pocket and gave the boy a coin. The boy took off happily and Grady shut the door and returned to the hotel room.

"Humph," Gus growled. "Every time ya turn in this ugly city there's a hand out grabbing fer yer money."

Grady opened the note and smile appeared. "Drink your expensive Irish whiskey, Gus. It'll improve your attitude."

"My atti...? What in Tarnation are you talking about?" Gus grumbled and looked up at his friend. "That a smile glued on your face?"

"We've received an invitation," Grady announced looking up from the note.

"From the looks of ya, it might be from the Queen of that thar England."



“Better,” Grady answered in delight. “We’ve received an invitation to dinner by Lord Harold Stuart on Beacon Hill. He’s the father of the woman this morning.”

“You sweet on her?” Gus asked boldly.

“I don’t know her,” Grady hemmed.

“Humph! Don’t mean nottin when you been thunderstruck boy. You should know you don’t know nottin about her. That thar woman may be the daughter of a Lord and all, but you she may be a connivin little she witch out after yer money,” Gus warned. “Fancy clothes don’t mean nottin.”

“I should give the man the opportunity to thank me for saving his girl’s life,” Grady suggested sheepishly. Just the thought of seeing her again was twisting him up inside. Had he been thunderstruck? He didn’t know for sure, but he did know he wanted to see her again.

Gus spit out the whiskey he just sipped and laughed heartily. “Hero are ya? That head is gonna be to big to fit the door framework of our ranch.”

“You cantankerous old goat! I’m going to dinner. Are you coming with me or not?”

Gus was still laughing. “We’ll need prettier duds, but I’ll go with you. Someone has to protect you from connivin females.”



Chapter 2

Ashley looked in her full-length mirror for the fifth time. She turned and turned again. "Are you certain this a good color for me?"

"You look exquisite! If you were anymore beautiful you'd have to hide yourself," Alyson cajoled. "You'd think you were expecting Queen Victoria's son for dinner. You never acted this way with any of your other suitors, much less Grant Wessex whom does wish to be your husband."

Ashley turned bright pink. Her sister didn't know she was anxious about seeing that man again, Grady McGillinen. She had learned his name early this morning when her mother sent the invitation after obtaining it from Grant Wessex.

Grant had visited this morning for tea. He had wanted to be certain Ashley was not injured in the accident.

Ashley had feigned a headache. She didn't feel up to telling Grant she didn't want him to continue his suit. He had been sweet and concerned over her welfare. He was such a nice man. His concerns seemed genuine, but she simply was not attracted to him. She also felt that he wasn't strongly attracted to her. It was just a feeling, but the Stuart women usually were correct with their feelings.

Ashley's wandering thoughts were brought back to the moment when a carriage pulled into the drive of the Stuart Mansion. Ashley pulled the curtain aside to look out the window. Her heart began racing wildly when she watched the sandy haired hulk of a man step out of the carriage. He was dressed in formal black wear and the trousers appeared tight giving her a full view of muscular thighs. He was handsome indeed, this man that saved her life.

"Be civil my love," Margaret warned when the bell pull announced the arrival of their guests.

"Of course I'll be civil," Harold countered readjusting his cravat. "He may be Irish, but he saved my baby's life. I can tolerate



an Irishman for one meal. I will reward him handsomely for his deed.”

“He may not want money,” Margaret interjected. “The Irish have a large amount of pride.”

“I used to be in the House of Lords, my dear,” Harold replied gruffly. “I think I can handle an evening dinner with an Irishman, savages that they are.”

Margaret groaned and plopped down on the parlor chair.

“What?”

“Savages that they are? You pompous old goat!” Margaret snapped. “If it isn’t British, if it isn’t money, if it isn’t Beacon Hill, it is savage!”

“The Irish are savages, luv,” Harold responded.

“And the East Indian, and the Native American Indians, the natives of the Sandwich Islands, and let us not forget the Scots!” Margaret crackled.

“Let’s not have a row, luv,” Harold said trying to calm the situation.

“Certainly not,” Margaret agreed heatedly. “Dinner must be a quiet time to give this gentleman our thanks for saving our daughter’s life.”

“Absolutely!” Harold exclaimed rising to greet their guests. He stopped at Margaret’s chair and offered his arm.

“This here place is a dad burned palace,” Gus offered allowing the butler to take his coat. “Don’t like no palace! Sides, this here suit is dad blamed uncomfortable!”

“Hush Gus,” Grady reprimanded. “This is a Lord’s home. We must be genteel!”

“Humph,” Gus snorted.

“Gentlemen, welcome!” Margaret greeted extending her hand.

“Well doggie, if that ain’t a purty little filly,” Gus blurted out taking Margaret’s hand and shaking it firmly.

Margaret held back her smile. She immediately liked the gruff old gentleman.

Harold rolled his eyes. He extended his hand to Grady. “You must be Grady McGillinen, the man that saved my daughter yesterday.”



Grady felt his cravat choking his response. "I am Grady McGillinen, your highness."

Margaret chuckled, "This is America, Mr. McGillinen. Titles are not honored here."

Harold inhaled sharply, "This may be America, my dear, but Royalty is something one is born into and accepted around the world including this country."

"Thank you for inviting us to dinner," Grady interjected hoping he did not create a faux pas.

"Show us the vittles, Duchess. I'm so hungry my stomach is a stickin to my backbone!" Gus exclaimed taking Margaret's arm. "Show us the way."

"We'll be called for dinner when it is served," Harold bristled. "This way to the parlor gentlemen."

Ashley and Alyson descended the staircase.

Grady looked up at Ashley. The candlelight in the hall gave her an ethereal vision of an angel. The dress she wore was a pale blue and décolletage was proper but a bit revealing. The gown was off the shoulder and layers of petticoats gave the skirt the look of clouds over the mountains of Cherry Valley. He spotted a glimpse of ankle as Ashley walked down the stairs. Her satin slippers matched the gown. His insides twisted and turned. Grady was not sure he could eat a meal.

"Mr. McGillinen, my daughters Ashley and Alyson," Harold introduced taking one daughter in each arm. "Our eldest daughter, Audrey, is married and will be arriving with her husband to join us."

The group walked to the parlor where they were served tea for the girls, wine for Margaret, and brandy for the men.

Audrey and Henry Astor arrived a short time later. Introductions were made. It turned out that Henry Astor was one of the partners in the investment firm Gus and Grady used. They had met with the senior partners to discuss the future of railroads in America as an investment.

The butler announced dinner was served when the bell chime once again announced a guest.

Grant Wessex entered the hall giving his coat to the maid that answered the door. "Good evening, Lord Stuart," Grant greeted cheerfully. He walked directly to Ashley giving her a peck on the cheek. He took Ashley's arm. "Thank you for the invitation, Lord



Stuart. I did want to be here and personally thank Mr. McGillinen once again for saving my fiancé.”

Ashley glared at her father and then pulled away slightly from Grant’s hold. “I am not your fiancé, Lord Wessex,” she whispered angrily.

“Not yet, but I’ve discussed this with your Papa,” Grant whispered in return.

Grady’s heart stopped beating at the announcement. He didn’t understand his own emotions but he wanted to scream at the Brit that Ashley belonged to him. Didn’t he save her life as the Brit stood staring? Didn’t saving her life make her his? He thought he read this somewhere.

Gus sat at the table and stared at the settings. “What in the Sam Hill do you need so much dad blamed stuff fer? A spoon or fork with a knife will do. Gosh Almighty there gotta be at least three of each here!”

Again Margaret tamped down her smile.

Harold leaned over the table to whisper in Margaret’s ear, “Savages, just like I said.”

Ashley heard her father and blushed hoping no one else had heard his remark.

The first course was served and the family ate in silence. When the second course was served Grant felt some small chitchat would be nice.

“Where do you live, Mr. McGillinen?” Grant asked toying with his soup.

“Gus and I live in Utah Territory.”

Grant was surprised by Grady’s non-communicative answer. “What does one do in that wilderness? Are you a soldier? Have you seen any Indians, have you fought them?” Grant wasn’t about to let a conversation die on the vine.

“Does he look like a soldier?” Gus growled in response. “We see Injuns all the time, but where we live there are the Sosoni Injuns. They’re a peaceable lot. Nicer than most white folk I’ve met. Friends with lots of them. Fought a couple though, me and Grady had to kill a few Utes.”

“This is hardly a conversation for dinner,” Margaret attempted in intervention.

“He asked,” Gus grouched concentrating once again on his soup.



Grant pulled at his cravat. "What do you do for a living out there?"

"I dabble in many things," Grady answered simply.

"I will attest to that," Henry spoke up quickly. "Mr. McGillinen is one of our larger accounts in the investment firm."

"But you live out there?" Alyson asked. "Or do you have residence here in Boston or New York?"

"Done tolt you, we live in Utah Territory," Gus grumbled. "Got any meat for this meal? Flighty females."

"Gus!" Grady cringed. He loved Gus like a father but the man was making them look like backwoods savages.

"What?" Gus snarled back. "Got any bread to sop up the soup."

Margaret chuckled and passed the breadbasket to Gus.

"Thanky kindly ma'am. Yer a gem all right," Gus complimented.

The entrée was served.

"What investments do you dabble in?" Harold queried. He was suddenly quite interested in this silent guest that saved his daughter's life. His curiosity was piqued by the silence of the tall muscular stranger.

"Mr. Astor here can tell you more," Grady evaded. He couldn't help but stare at Ashley. His body was getting warmer and for the first time in his life, his libido was uncontrolled. His trousers were getting tighter and tighter. He wanted to hold Ashley and kiss her until her lips swelled. He wanted to invade her body with his and fill her with his children.

Henry responded to the question, "In our investment firm all our clients purchases are confidential."

"We bought some horse flesh, livestock, stocks, bank drafts, properties, and jest now some railroad futures," Gus blurted out chewing on the steak. "Good cow here ma'am."

Margaret was enjoying herself. Gus was pure Americana and she enjoyed his easy unbridled life style and unfettered dialogue. "It is a good cut of steak."

Harold choked on his water. "It is Filet Mignon, my dear. That is hardly called a good cut of steak."

"Bit puny though," Gus added interrupting Lord Stuart. "We eat big T-bones four times the size of this."



"I'm sure you do," Margaret chuckled. "In Boston we have more of a problem obtaining such cuts of beef."

"Yer outta come out to our ranch, ma'am. We got us a cook that could make ya up some mighty fine vittles," Gus offered with a toothy smile. "It would be right nice to have a purty lady like you visit."

Restraining her laughter, Margaret replied, "We just may do that." Deep down in her senses she felt a trip to that ranch might happen.

Ashley and Grady tried, but could not break the eye contact. It was as if their bodies were swirling in one large sweeping current.

Alyson felt the energy. She occupied herself watching her sister and this Grady. Alyson barely concerned herself with the conversations.

At last dessert was served.

"I do wish to extend to you, Mr. McGillinen, my deepest appreciation for saving my youngest daughter's life. I am a wealthy man and I would like to extend my gratitude. I have a bank draft here in the amount of five thousand federal notes. It is my thank you," Harold expressed pulling the slip of paper from his jacket.

Grady was surprised but quickly recovered. "I don't need any payment. There was something that needed to be done and I did it."

"Surely you can use the money out there in that wild land," Harold pursued.

"Ain't ya been listenin or is ya hard a hearin?" Gus interrupted testily. "Grady is a rich man, probably richer n you."

"Thank you for your thoughts," Grady interceded. "I don't need any reward for saving the life of a beautiful woman."

"I would consider it an offense if you did not take my gratitude," Harold blustered.

"I will accept your gratitude, I will not accept your money," Grady stated firmly.

"You're a stubborn Irishman," Harold groused.

"I am that," Grady acknowledged proudly. He was stubborn enough to propose to a betrothed woman. If this was being Thunderstruck he was indeed. There was something next to dynamite being near this woman. It was love and she would be his wife.

Harold stuffed the bank draft back into his jacket.



After dinner the family began to walk to the parlor. Ashley rose first and moved quickly out of the dining room. She stood silently in the dark shadows of an alcove and took Grady's hand as he passed by. She led him to the quiet library just down the hall from the dining room.

The library had every wall filled with bookshelves and books. The fireplace was warming the chilled room with a small crackling fire. Several large candles illuminated the large room.

Ashley released Grady's hand to close the door behind them and set the lock. Turning to Grady she grinned, "I want to talk to you without being interrupted."

Grady was spellbound and couldn't speak if he tried.

"First, I am not engaged to Grant Wessex," Ashley clarified. "He is a nice man and he is courting me, but we are not or ever will be engaged."

"Does Lord Wessex know this?" Grady managed to utter in a strangled voice.

"He knows we are not formally engaged. As for learning I have no intention of marrying him will come tomorrow from me," Ashley insisted strongly.

Grady felt so happy he wanted to float. He wanted to kiss her lips and make Ashley his wife legally, spiritually and physically. He couldn't help himself. Instead he whispered, "Thank God, Saint Bridgett, and Holy Mary Mother of God." Those were strong words for a man that really didn't have a true faith in any religion or higher power.

Ashley blinked. "What did you just say?" Ashley was raised as a Protestant and it appeared Grady was an Irish Catholic. Here was the man she wanted to marry and he was everything her father criticized.

Grady choked out, "I love you, Ashley Stuart. I want you as my wife." He moved to her in a breath and her lips were beneath his. He tasted her outer lips. Slowly and gently he opened her lips with his tongue probing to meet her tongue. Grady pulled her closer. Their tongues dueled until both their bodies were on fire.

Ashley no longer felt her legs. A strange sensation of wet warmth filled her woman's secret place. There was an insatiable urge to draw Grady into her body and never let him go. She felt she needed



Grady to fill her with that manly part of his body that felt hot warm and growing.

Grady was losing lucidity. He had to stop before he took his future wife on the floor of her father's library. He broke apart before that happened. He would make to love to his wife as his wife and not until then. "Marry me, Ashley Stuart."

"Yes. Oh yes. I will marry you," Ashley replied breathlessly.

"I'll talk to your father tomorrow and we'll be married as soon as possible. I want you as my wife before the month is over."

"Yes," Ashley whispered placing her arms around Grady and uniting their lips. "I love you. I just know we are meant to be together. It's as if our two energies have existed for each other since eternity."

Grady crushed her small frame into his massive body. She fit perfectly into him as his lips descended upon her once again.

Ashley was in a swirl of physical wants and needs. She boldly placed her hand upon Grady's growing manhood. She didn't know why. She just felt it was right. There seemed to be no shame or hindrances of any sort between them.

Grady was shaken at her touch. He had to stop this now. If he didn't he would create a scandal he did not want his darling Ashley to endure. "We must stop or I will not."

"I don't want to stop," Ashley breathed heavily. Her body was on fire.

"I will take you as my wife, not here and not now. We must return to the others before we are missed. I will talk to your father in the morning."

"Promise me you will? I want to be your wife completely."

"And I want to be your husband. I want to fill you with my children, watch them grow, and age with you by my side," Grady promised. "I will be here first thing in the morning."

"You go ahead," Ashley ordered. "I need to calm my wobbling knees."

Grady grinned and obeyed without question. He leaned to kiss Ashley's forehead. "Tomorrow at first light."

Ashley couldn't let her family see her flushed face and swollen lips. She pulled the servant bell for her personal maid, Charlotte. She told her maid to inform her family she was indisposed and going to her room.



Grady went to the parlor and gave his excuses. This time Gus was the one wanting to stay. The old geezer had taken a liking to Margaret Stuart and was filling her with stories of his western escapades.

"Yer got it bad," Gus complained in the borrowed Stuart carriage. "Yer smell like a man exploded. Yer that hot for the gel are ya?"

"We are going to be married," Grady replied nonchalantly as if it were any day news.

"That a fact?" Gus laughed. "At least she ain't no scheming money hungry gel. Got herself a real nice Ma. Ain't fond of the Pa. He's a coot. When yer gonna tell the old coot?"

"First thing in the morning," Grady stated.

"Best get home and rest up," Gus said grinning broadly. "Meeting head to head with that Pa of hers is a gonna be worse than wrestling a grizzly bear bare handed."

"Just stand by to nurse my wounds," Grady chuckled. "I intend to take on the bear and win."

Grady woke at dawn, bathed, put on his best eastern suit and ate a hearty breakfast. He couldn't remember ever being so happy. His need to grow, expand, learn, was at last tempered with something he had missed since he left Dublin. He would have love, wife, and family. Of course Grady knew the upper class never woke before ten o'clock, but he would be on the doorstep before eight.

"The master is still abed," the butler protested as Grady pushed his way past him.

"I'll wait for him in the library," Grady growled walking directly to the place of his engagement the night before. "I'll wait all day and all night if I must, but tell your master of the house I'm waiting for him."

One hour later Harold Stuart rang for his valet. The upstairs maid was ordered to prepare his breakfast and bring it to the room. Margaret stirred from her sleep. She waited until the valet dressed her husband and rose from the bed taking her wrapper to the dressing room. Everything was normal until the butler brought in the breakfast tray and informed the Lord Stuart a gentleman was waiting to see him in the library.



“Who is it this early in the morning?” Harold inquired.

“The gentleman invited to dinner last evening,” the butler replied.

“Lord Wessex?”

“No sir, Mr. Grady McGillinen.”

“Did he say his purpose for calling?” Margaret queried entering the room from her dressing area.

“No my lady.”

“We’ll entertain him in the library after our breakfast,” Harold commanded.

“I think we will need fortifying first,” Margaret agreed.

“What on earth we need to fortify ourselves? The greedy Irishman probably came for the reward money.”

Margaret sighed audibly. “Harold weren’t you listening last night. He is a self-made wealthy man. Audrey’s Henry said he was one of the largest investors in his firm.”

“He still wants the money, you’ll see. The Irish are a drunken greedy savage lot.”

Margaret moaned and ate her toast. She had gone into Ashley and Alyson’s room late at night. In the candlelight she viewed sleeping Ashley’s swollen lips, flushed face, and large smile. She knew instantly that Ashley would wed the rugged western man known as Grady McGillinen. She was happy for her daughter. After all, she married the man she loved. Audrey married the man she loved, and she knew Alyson would marry Cadet Jameson. Why shouldn’t Ashley marry the man she loved? She did know her husband and wouldn’t miss a moment of the head to head battle about to occur. Harold would never admit it, but Ashley was his favorite daughter. Ashley was most like her mother. Ashley was everything he adored in his wife. Margaret had a fiery spirit and temper. Margaret was adventurous and willing to go headfirst thinking about things later. Margaret loved trying new and different things.

It was ten thirty when Lord Harold Stuart appeared in the library. Margaret was by his side and would not be persuaded to leave.



Chapter 3

"He's here," Alyson murmured into her sleeping sister's ear. She nudged her sister trying to wake her.

Ashley stirred and smiled. "Kiss me again, Grady."

"Wake up! He is here. Grady is here!" Alyson pursued.

"Umm," Ashley mumbled and suddenly sat bolt upright. "Grady's here? Has he seen Papa? What time is it?"

"I won't answer one single question until you tell me what Grady McGillinen is doing here. You know why he's here. I know you do!" Alyson said stubbornly putting her hands on her hips.

Ashley jumped from her bed and grabbed her wrapper. "He's asking Papa for my hand in marriage. We're going to be married before the month is over."

"I knew it. I just knew it!" Alyson bubbled. "Last night the power between you was so obvious. I'm so happy for you. But Papa won't allow it. He thinks Irishmen are drunken Barbarians."

"Grady won't let that stop him," Ashley boasted. "We will be married. I know it. Help me dress and send for Charlotte to do my hair."

"Are you insane?" Harold Stuart roared. "I will not allow my daughter to wed a drunken barbaric Irishman. Besides, she is to marry Lord Grant Wessex."

"Ashley accepted my marriage proposal last evening. She told me she was not formally engaged to Lord Wessex," Grady pursued heatedly. He was finding it difficult to control his Irish temper. At least that was true about his Irish heritage. "I am not a drunk or barbaric. I am sir an Irishman and proud of it! I was raised in a good Catholic family."

"Oh God," Harold groaned. "A Catholic!"

Grady went in for the kill. "I intend to marry Ashley in a Catholic Church!" He didn't mean it, but Harold had angered him.



Harold nearly turned purple. “The **HELL** you will!”

“Harold, watch your tongue!” Margaret interjected. “We should be discussing this more reasonably.”

“Reasonable?” Harold sputtered. “A complete stranger comes into our home and announces he is going to marry our youngest daughter. Please explain to me how we can discuss this more reasonably. Good grief woman, he’s an Irish Catholic.”

“We’ve been through that,” Grady snapped. “I will never be ashamed of my heritage. I am as proud of my name as you are of yours. The point of this meeting is to inform you of my upcoming marriage to your daughter. We will be married. I was hoping for your blessing but we will be married with or without it. I’ll be calling for your daughter this afternoon.”

“You impudent upstart. I am a Stuart. I am a direct descendent of the royal Stuart blood. There is blue blood in my family line. What do you offer? Sheep blood?”

The insult struck Grady hard. “Just like you I have red blood running through my veins. I come from good solid working stock. Have you worked a day in your life? I mean hard work. Your blue blood means nothing to me. I am in love with your daughter and will marry her. Tell her I’ll call this afternoon and plan our wedding together with or without you,” Grady stormed. He walked out of the library and slammed the door so hard it vibrated on its hinges for several minutes.

Harold pulled the servant bell. The butler appeared instantly.

“Send for Lord Wessex,” Harold bellowed. “Tell him he is required here urgently.”

Ashley flew down the stairs to see Grady leaving the mansion and entering the waiting carriage. She heard the door slamming. Ashley ran to the library instinctively. She stopped when she heard her mother shouting at her father.

“What is the matter with you? Can’t you see they love each other? You will create a divide so wide with our daughter it may never be spanned?” Margaret argued loudly.

“She’s too young to know she’s in love. I know what is best for her,” Harold growled.

“Yet you would send her into marriage with Wessex,” Margaret countered angrily.



"He'll be good for her. A solid arrangement with a good bloodline."

"Oh for God's sake, Harold. Are you planning on breeding dogs? Are you so concerned about pedigrees?" Margaret shouted. "If that's true my pedigree certainly doesn't amount to anything. My father was just like Grady. He was a self made man. He built his fortune from the bottom up. He wasn't born to wealth like you."

"Now Margaret, we aren't discussing us," Harold protested. "We are discussing the future happiness of our daughter. He's a drunken barbaric Irish Catholic for God's sake."

"He is a good man that loves our daughter," Margaret countered with emphasis. "You pompous old fool." Margaret stormed out of the library not even noticing her daughter hiding in the alcove.

"Get me Wessex here immediately!" Harold screeched loudly.

Ashley ran to the kitchen taking her wrap with her. She didn't stop until she reached the stables. Finding the stable master she requested a carriage be readied for her.

Grant Wessex was in the library before noon.

"Did you have breakfast?" Harold asked quietly.

"Yes," Grant replied quickly. He was curious as to the reason for his summons. "You said this was urgent?"

"It is," Harold responded. "You've asked me to court my daughter, Ashley. I need to finish this quickly. I need to send out the banns of my Ashley's betrothal to you."

Grant felt as if he were pole axed. Playing the courtier was fun. Getting leg shackled was another thing entirely. He still couldn't get Celeste out of his mind. Initially he thought courting Ashley, the beautiful young debutante, might erase Celeste. Faced with the reality of marriage turned him cold. He couldn't get Celeste out of his mind. He liked Ashley well enough. She was spirited like Celeste, but she wasn't Celeste. He couldn't marry her. "What brought this urgency on?"

"That barbarian arrived this morning to inform me of his impending marriage to my daughter," Harold informed angrily. "Imagine the audacity of the savage."

"Just whom is it we are discussing?" Grant inquired.

"That Irish Catholic McGillinen, that's who," Harold sputtered.

"The man who saved her life just two days ago?"



“The same.” Harold puffed out.

“Well, Bloody Hell!” Grant chuckled. “Does Ashley love him?”

“What does that matter?”

“It matters a great deal. It seems to me there is nothing to be upset about if Ashley doesn’t consent to the marriage,” Grant offered logically. Have you discussed this with Ashley?”

Harold blushed guiltily. “She was sleeping at the time.”

“You need to discuss this with Ashley.”

Harold pulled the bell cord. Again, the butler appeared instantly.

“Send Charlotte to collect Ashley. Tell her Lord Wessex and I will speak to her,” Harold ordered.

“We request to speak to Miss Ashley,” Grant corrected.

It was several minutes later that the butler returned with the news Ashley Stuart could not be found. It was reported she was last seen headed to the stables.

Harold scrambled to the door. He walked quickly to the stables only to learn from the stable master that Miss Ashley had taken a carriage out for a morning ride.

Harold returned into the house and bellowed loud enough to wake the dead, “Margaret! Margaret, get down here!”

Standing at the head of the stair case Margaret answered the summons, “What is it now, Harold?”

“Your daughter has taken off without a word. I warn you now madam that she is not to old for a sound paddling. I will give it to her as soon as she returns home. Prepare yourself and do not interfere!” Harold steamed. He returned to the waiting Lord Wessex out of breath. “Thank you for coming at my request. I’ll get this settled with Ashley and we’ll continue our discussion.”

Grant rose, nodded, and returned to his hotel with a release of relief.

Ashley in the meantime was entering the hotel of Grady McGillinen. All she did was order the driver to take her to his hotel. It was the same driver that had returned them here the evening prior. “I’m looking for the rooms of Mr. Grady McGillinen,” Ashley stated.

“He is in room 214,” the desk clerk responded. “I’ll send a bellboy to announce your arrival.”



"That won't be necessary, I'll just go there."

The clerk raised his brow. "I'm sorry madam, but that simply isn't done in this hotel. Your name please."

Ashley set her stubborn chin out. "Miss Ashley Louise Stuart."

The clerk scratched down the name with a note and rang for the bellboy. He handed the note to the bellboy and gave him the room number.

Gus answered the knock and took the note. He gave the bellboy a small coin. "Now git! I'm tired of all these open hands."

"Who was that, Gus?" Grady inquired.

"That pimple faced kid sending another note with his grubby open hand," Gus grouched handing the note to Grady.

"What the..." Grady gulped after reading the note. He was a flashing blur to Gus as he ran from the room and down the stairs. He looked around the lobby and found Ashley. He ran to her and held her tightly. "What are you doing here?" he whispered as his lips found hers in front of God and everyone in the hotel lobby.

Between kisses Ashley answered, "It's Papa. He's in a rage. You talked to him. He intends to keep us apart. I won't have it. I want to be your wife. We'll marry today. He can't do anything about it."

"Are you sure about this?" Grady moaned as he held his joy and libido in check.

"I'm sure," Ashley answered simply holding onto Grady's strong body like an anchor holding a ship during a horrible storm.

"We'll get the papers and talk to a priest. I saw a Church down the road from here. We'll be married this evening," Grady said without a doubt in his mind. Ashley was his the moment he saw her. "I'll take you to my room."

As they crossed the lobby toward the stairs the desk clerk stepped in front of them.

"I'm sorry sir, but this type of business the hotel does not approve of or allow. We simply do not allow unmarried maidens into a single man's rooms," the desk clerk said without stating the implications of an illicit liaison.

Grady simply turned his steel gray eyes onto the desk clerk. "Then find my wife a room near mine."

"She said her name was Miss Ashley Stuart, sir," the clerk returned heatedly.



“That’s true until this afternoon. After this you may change my hotel registration to Mr. and Mrs. Grady McGillinen.”

The desk clerk had the courtesy to blush. “Yes sir.” He moved out of the way.

Grady took Ashley’s arm and walked determinedly up the hotel stairs to his room.

Ashley held her back straight, her chin up, and her eyes upon her handsome future husband.

The door to the room opened before Grady had lifted the key to the lock. The grizzled unshaved face of Gus greeted them with one of his rare dazzling smiles.

“Yer talked to her Pa, didn’t ya? He had a hissy fit didn’t he? I knew he would. Yer Pa’s got more airs than the sky up above. Yer Ma’s okay with it, ain’t she?”

“Can we get in the room first, before we answer your twenty questions,” Grady growled menacingly moving forward and threatening to walk over his good friend and partner. He wasn’t certain his Ashley was up to discussing what happened. She was calm but he noted her nose was stuffy and her eyes slightly irritated as if she had been crying.

Gus in his usual good judgment stepped out of the way. He waited until Grady seated Ashley and he sat next to her holding her hand. After a moment he took the chair across from the divan where Grady and Ashley sat. He folded his arms and waited.

Ashley cleared her throat and squeezed Grady’s hand tightly. “No, Mr. Bartley. I did not speak with my father or mother. He did have a hissy fit as you say. I am not certain about anything other than I know I love you Grady McGillinen and want to be your wife. I left when I heard my parents shouting at each other. What I heard was enough to make me leave my home and come to you, Grady. Let’s be married today.”

“Do you really want to marry without benefit of frills and friends?” Grady asked warily holding his breath. Her answer would make or break his heart.

“I don’t need frills, parties, friends, or family to know that you are my family. Yes, I am certain.”

“How did you get here?” Grady asked choking on his happiness.



"I borrowed Papa's carriage. The driver is waiting for me. Shall I send him home?" Ashley questioned hoping against hope Grady wouldn't send her home. She may have jumped off a cliff, but she was certain of water beneath her. All she needed was a ship, her Grady, waiting for her to take her away.

"Good, I'll need to borrow it myself. I must find the city clerk and obtain our marriage certificate. There's a church down the street. I'll need to speak to the priest," Grady said quietly. He picked up Ashley's chin. "We'll be married before this evening. You stay with Gus. I'll take care of everything." Grady kissed Ashley with a sweet and reassuring gentleness. "I'll be back soon."

Ashley watched Grady leave the hotel room. It was then she felt Gus staring at her.

"Grady is like a son to me. I'd seen it when he looked at ya that the boy was Thunderstruck. I'd knowed it for sure when I saw the two of ya at dinner last night. Don't fret little purty. He's a fine boy. He'll make ya the best husband a woman could hope fer, but ya will be leavin this here big, dirty, ugly, and noisy city life. Don't rightly know how ya feel about this life of yers, but we'll be livin in a land brighter than heaven. The air is fresh and sweet. Ther's real freedom in this land, but a price to pay fer it," Gus warned. "It's a hard land as it is free. Ther's no fine stores to buy gewgaws. "Ain't gonna have no fancy carriages. Sometimes ther's injun trouble, but injuns like the Sosoni won't give ya problems unless ya push em in a corner. Ther's lowlife sneaky critters on two legs ya got ta watch out fer all the time. Ther's wild animals that yer gonna have learn about and understand so ya don't cross paths. Yer gonna have to learn to get along with all types of respect and hate, pride and intolerance. Kin yer live with all this gel?"

"Grady knows all these things. He's lived all these things. He'll teach me," Ashley replied. "I'll learn everything with Grady by my side."

Gus grinned broadly. "Ya have a purty soul jest like yer Ma. Ya have grit like her. I kin tell."

Ashley was enjoying these moments with Grady's partner. She couldn't resist the challenge of sparring with him. "How would you know my Mamma has grit?"



“That purty little thing, a man can spot right off!” Gus crowed. He was right. The little girl was planning on sparring with him. “Jest like Grady knowed ya had grit.”

“Well,” Ashley hesitated getting her thoughts together. “Jest... I mean, how does one define this grit?”

“What do it mean?” Gus chuckled. He liked this girl. She was challenging him with words. What she didn’t know and neither did anyone know that he was a Harvard graduate. After his life had been turned upside down during the war of 1812, he took off to wilds of the west and found comfort there. He even had a Sosoni wife for a few years before French Trappers killed her. He was bitter with life. His life was turning into one whiskey bottle after another when he met Grady McGillinen in San Francisco. The kid had been wet behind the ears, but had a determination that might set the new world on fire. He was sharp, had a good mind, and quick learner. Gus spotted that right off. He was a boy with a dream, but still a boy. Gus believed in destiny and knew Grady would be the son he never had. He knew their destiny would be entwined. His gut instincts were right. Together he and Grady made a paradise and haven in the Promised Land. It was as if they had the touch of King Midas. Everything they touched to success. “It means guts and determination to see a thing through to the end.”

Ashley raised her brow. She didn’t know what answer she expected, but it wasn’t that one. It was if Gus was a completely different person. He changed from the grizzly codger to an intelligent well-educated gentleman. His spoken word had transformed completely. “Mr. Bartley, you are a fraud!”

Gus sat back with a start. “What?”

Ashley rose from the divan, walked to Gus and jabbed her finger in his chest. “A fraud. It is as simple as that. You pretend to be an ill educated simpleton, but you aren’t that at all. I heard you talk about things at dinner. You are as much a simpleton as I am a chambermaid. You sir, you are well educated. You are as sharp as a tack! If you as an eastern educated man, Harvard, I am guessing correctly? If you can make it in the wilds of the west, well then, so can I.”

Gus slapped his thigh and guffawed. “Hell bent fer leather! Ya saw through me mask. No one ever done that before! Durned if you ain’t perfect fer me Grady.”



“Why do you do this?” Ashley pursued placing her hands on her hips. “Why do you continue with this façade?” I heard you just a moment ago. I know you can speak properly!”

Gus stopped laughing and brought his good humor down to a chuckle. He really liked Grady’s future wife. “Yes, you are correct. I was educated in Harvard, fought a bloody war, and ran away to the wilds. I met and married a wonderful woman, named Running Waters. She was a Sosoni. Running Waters was a wonderful wife. I went to town to buy her a new pretty dress. I came back to find her body. She had been raped brutally. It was obvious she fought bravely. She had been smothered to death, but they broke her arm and she was covered with bite marks and bruises.”

Ashley kneeled on the floor. Her heart felt the pain Gus had endured.

Gus put back his head and squelched his tears. “I buried her. I packed up and left that place. I couldn’t bear it without Running Waters. A week or so later I was sitting in a saloon. I started drinking heavily then. I was a sight. I hadn’t bathed since I buried my wife. I hadn’t shaved either. I hadn’t changed my clothes. The French trappers weren’t in any better shape, but they were bragging about an injun they came upon. She was pretty thing and fought like a wildcat. I won’t embarrass with you about what they said. I knew it was my Running Waters they were talking about. I killed in war. I killed my enemy in the war. Those trappers became my enemy and I must kill them. I waited until dark. Those trappers were stupid men. They were looking into the fire. Every fool knows you don’t look into fire at night. You’re blind for several seconds when you look into the darkness. I struck then. I called out to them and threw my two blades directly into their hearts. I buried them that night under earth and large rocks. No one has or ever will find them. I took their furs and gear, walked into the wild country and never looked back. The person I created shielded me from many things and people. I’ve worked hard to create old Gus. I don’t want to lose him now.”

Ashley allowed her tears to flow. “Oh Gus!”

“No tears little purty. I ain’t got no regrets. Bein with Grady has been good fer me,” Gus said stroking Ashley’s cheek with the back of his hand.

Ashley forced a smile, “How do you do that? How can you switch so quickly from one person to another?”



“Practice,” Gus replied simply.

Ashley couldn’t help herself. First it was a giggle that grew to a chuckle. Soon she was laughing and brushing away the tears. “You old goat! I’ll keep your secret. Of course I was right. It was Harvard and you are a fraud.” She couldn’t help reaching up and hugging Gus either.

Gus hugged her in return. For the first time in his life he felt free from a nightmare. This was the beginning of his life. He may not have much time left on earth, but it was the beginning of a good new life. He felt it as strongly as the day he met Grady McGillinen.

Ashley straightened to regain her composure once again. She vowed she would keep Gus’s secret and she knew at that moment her life had just begun. It would a good new life and it would be happy.”



Chapter 4

Margaret returned to her room after Harold's threat. She wasn't concerned that Harold would ever lift a finger to hurt any of her daughters, but she knew her daughter was not out for a morning jaunt. If Ashley was missing, it meant she had left the house permanently. Margaret dressed quickly with the assistance of an upstairs maid. Her first stop would be Alyson.

"Where did Ashley go?" Margaret questioned her middle daughter.

"Ashley left the house?"

Margaret hugged her daughter. "Grady came this morning to announce he and Ashley were getting married."

"Yes, Ashley told me that. Did Papa take it well?"

"No, darling. Papa didn't take it well at all. Did you and Ashley hear your Papa shouting?"

"Yes, we heard Papa, Grady, and you shouting. Ashley was downstairs before I heard you. Of course we didn't understand any of it."

Margaret splayed her fingers across her heart. "Ashley must have heard her argument with Harold. "Dear God, Ashley must have heard. Did Ashley give you any idea where she would be going?"

Ashley pulled back from her mother's embrace. "Mamma, I didn't even know Ashley had left. I remained in my room for fear of Papa's temper. I've even taken breakfast here. Oh Mamma. What has Ashley done?"

"I'm certain it is something headstrong," Margaret sighed. "Where would I go if this were me?"

Alyson pressed her mother's hand into her own hand. "I would go to the man I loved, family be damned."

Margaret's eyes lit up. "Of course!" she agreed quickly. "Watch your language, Alyson. You are a lady."



“A lady like you, Mamma. With the exact same stubborn temperament that has kept Papa happy all these years. You’ve slipped a few curse words yourself.” Alyson teased.

Margaret smiled broadly. “I believe I could use an enjoyable trip into the city today, would you like to join me?”

Margaret was slipping on her soft kid leather gloves when Harold entered the parlor with a new business partner named, Cecil Mann.

“Where are you off?” Harold asked Margaret quietly. He was the epitome of repose in the company of a partner.

“Alyson and I will be in the city tending to some um ah shopping,” Margaret prevaricated.

Harold nodded his head in acknowledgement. “Have a good trip and send Ashley home should you run across her. We still need to have a talk, her and I.”

Margaret allowed the butler to place her wrap on her shoulders and left for the waiting carriage.

Grady had just entered the hotel room. He sent the carriage back to the Stuart mansion. In his pocket was the marriage license. He had talked to the priest. He ordered the desk clerk to have a hack ready. All he needed was to collect his bride.

Ashley and Gus had enjoyed a lively conversation and a good meal while waiting for Grady. Ashley rushed into Grady’s arms. “You must be hungry.”

“Hungry for you,” Grady teased kissing Ashley.

“Is everything arranged,” Ashley breathed heavily.

“Yes,” Grady answered between kisses and a breath.

“Then you must eat,” Ashley ordered pushing away.

“Listen to the little lady,” Gus chuckled. “Better git used to bein ordered around. Comes with the marriage vows I think.”

Grady put his arm around Ashley’s waist. “Lead the way your majesty. I am your humble servant.”

Their heads turned to the knocking on the door.

“Pimple face kid is turning kind a sissy like of a sudden,” Gus suggested. “Durn tired of them little open hands. What the Sam Hill is next?” He opened the door.

“Hello Gus,” Margaret greeted when Gus opened the door. “Is Grady available, perhaps my daughter as well?”



"If it ain't the purty lady," Gus clucked. "Come to join us fer tea?"

Margaret replied, "Absolutely." She walked past Gus and looked around the room stopping at Ashley in Grady's arms near the table. "Aha!"

"Mamma, I'm not coming home. Grady and I are getting married this afternoon," Ashley said stubbornly.

"That's why we are here," Alyson piped in. "Mamma and I are here for you. You can't marry without family. It isn't civilized."

Ashley felt a tear drip down her cheek. She ran to her sister and mother.

Margaret embraced her daughter. "My darling daughter. There is a sense we Stuart women have. We respond to it and we are happy for it. It may seem strange to everyone but us that we can fall in love in an instant and marry in three days."

"You approve?" Ashley questioned teary eyed and filled with emotion.

"Darling, it isn't for me, your Papa, your sisters, or anyone else to approve of anything for you. We all live our own lives. No one can live it for us. We make decisions and then live with the results good or bad. Then we make more decisions. Still we live our lives. It is wrong for a parent to make decisions for their children or anyone else," Margaret comforted. "Brush away those tears. We've got a wedding to plan this afternoon." She pulled out a magnificent white silk wedding gown from a large sack she was carrying. The dress was covered with a floral pattern created by white luminescent pearls. A border pattern of rhinestones surrounded the décolletage and sleeve cuffs. "I've been preparing this gown for you since you were sixteen."

"Mamma has one prepared for me already, too!" Alyson chirped producing another sack. She opened the bag and produced a large white lace Spanish mantilla. "Mamma didn't have the veil completed yet so we bought this. I hope you like it."

Ashley was speechless. "Mamma."

"Come dear, we need to get you dressed. I'm certain we don't have much time, do we, Mr. McGillinen?" Margaret questioned staring at her future son in law. She did admit he was a handsome specimen of a male.



“Just enough time for me to eat a meal,” Grady quipped. “The priest will be expecting us in two hours. It takes twenty minutes by hack to get there. And do call me Grady.”

“Eat your meal, Grady,” Margaret commanded. “We’ll be ready in time.”

An hour and one half later Margaret descended the stairs and instructed the desk clerk to bring her carriage to the front of the hotel. Grady and Gus were behind her. They would use the hack to take them to the church. Margaret had informed him that it was bad luck to see the bride before the wedding. She would bring Ashley in her carriage. Grady felt a little trepidation, but in the end he capitulated to Margaret Stuart.

All eyes in the lobby looked up to the staircase when Ashley began her descent in her wedding dress. She truly was a vision of beauty.

The desk clerk clucked, “Looks like I will be changing the register this day.

The bellboy handed him a note. “The old man said to let the bridal suite to the new couple. He’ll be staying in 214. He gave me a one-dollar Federal note to boot. The old geezer is pretty cheap normally.”

In the note were five twenty dollar gold pieces and instructions to provide not only the bridal suite, but a complete dinner, cake, and champagne fit for a wedding. The catch was he only had an hour to do it. If he accomplished the feat he could keep the rest of the money as a tip. The desk clerk sent the staff scattering on different errands quickly.

It was a cathedral, not a church, but it didn’t matter to Ashley as she stepped from the carriage. She was going to marry Grady and she felt strong for the first time in her life. Her Stuart sense had told her this would be a happy and filling life. The altar boys were waiting and held open the doors. She walked into the Cathedral and focused on Grady standing in front of the priest. Gus was by his side.

Margaret walked her daughter down the aisle. Alyson held her sister’s bridal dress train. Alyson would also serve as the maid of honor and witness for her sister.



The priest had not bothered to question if Ashley was Catholic. He merely assumed she was. Grady had already signed the papers promising to raise his children in the Catholic faith.

Grady looked at Ashley walking down the aisle and couldn't remember to breath. She looked like an angel. It was then he remembered how many times he had this dream. He had always believed it was an angel meeting him in a cathedral to bring him back to the faith. He had discounted that. He realized he had been given a peek into the future. This was meant to be. "Oomph," Grady whistled through his teeth after receiving a blow from Gus's elbow in his ribs.

"Breath boy, can't have ya faint dead away now," Gus chided.

Margaret stood with her daughter as the priest asked, "Who gives this woman in marriage?"

"I do," Margaret replied taking her daughter by the elbow and placing Ashley's hand in Grady's hand.

Grady felt a bit weak kneed. His eyes locked with Ashley's and remained there throughout the ceremony. He responded automatically. It seemed to him so did Ashley. They were caught up in a world all there own.

"The ring?" the priest requested.

Grady didn't know what to do. He forgot to buy a ring. He felt Gus nudging his back. He turned to Gus to see a beautiful diamond sparkling on the top of baguette diamonds set upon a simple gold band. He had forgotten about the rings, but Gus didn't. He would have to find out where the old coot had gotten them from since he had spent the afternoon with Ashley.

The rings were exchanged. The priest pronounced them husband and wife.

Grady took Ashley in his arms and pressed his lips gently upon hers. The simple wedding kiss turned into a kiss of passion that lasted so long the priest began to blush. Once again Gus took things in hand.

"Let the gel up fer air, or she'll pass out," Gus chided. "Sides, I want to kiss the purty bride."

The priest raised his arms in blessings and announced, "Mr. and Mrs. Grady McGillinen."

Margaret had soaked her handkerchief with her tears of happiness. Alyson held back her tears but sniffing could be heard throughout the entire ceremony. The bride and groom entered the rented hack.



“Guess I’m coming with you,” Gus announced taking Margaret’s arm.

“I guess you are,” Margaret agreed accepting Gus’s extended arm.

Gus put out his other arm for Alyson. “Lucky me. I get two purty ladies for dinner. Grady only got hisself one.”

The desk clerk greeted Grady and Ashley in the lobby. The couple was once again the center of attention. “Everything is arranged. I’ll take you to the bridal suite.”

Ashley and Grady looked at each other trying to understand.

Margaret, Alyson, and Gus walked in behind them.

The wedding party followed the desk clerk up the stairs to the third level of the hotel, down the hall to a room with two large doors. The clerk opened the doors to a large room with a banquet set on tables that was fit for a king. There was champagne in chill buckets and fluted crystal glasses for the champagne.

“Grady, this is wonderful,” Ashley whispered. “How did you do it?”

Honest as always Grady answered, “I didn’t.”

They looked at each other and said in unison, “Gus.”

The wedding party enjoyed the banquet and champagne. Margaret and Gus offered toasts to the bride and groom. Sometime during the party Grady corned Gus and asked, “How did you remember these things, the party, the rings, and how did you get the rings? You were with Ashley the entire time.”

“When ya tolt me about yer plans yer didn’t mention a suite fer yer to consummate the marriage,” Gus winked mischievously. “Yer didn’t plan fer the weddin feast and yer certainly didn’t mention the rings.”

“How did you do it,” Grady persisted.

“Anythin can be bought. We been careful all these years, but a special time like this needs to be special. I jest spent some money in the right places,” Gus confessed. “As for Mrs. McGillinen there, well even a lady has to visit a commode now and then.”

Grady couldn’t help himself. He reached over and hugged Gus.

“Stop that! Stop that,” Gus protested pushing away Grady’s arms. “Go to yer bride and hug her.” In fact, Gus was embarrassed.



He had never showed this type of generosity since Running Waters had been murdered.

It was late when Margaret and Alyson returned to Stuart Mansion. None other than Harold Stuart and Grant Wessex greeted them at the door.

"Where have you been, woman?" Harold thundered at Margaret. "The shops have been closed for hours. I've even sent out the police to look for this carriage."

Alyson hid behind her mother.

"Where is Ashley? Haven't you found her? You've been out long enough?" Harold demanded.

Margaret steeled her body and squared her shoulders. "We've been attending to Ashley's wedding with Grady McGillinen. It was a lovely wedding in a Catholic Cathedral. There was a luscious banquet with champagne. I admit I may have had too much to drink. I feel quite lightheaded. They are married, Harold. You may have a chasm between you and Ashley, but at least I know I will hear from her. Perhaps I might visit her. You must excuse me now. I am exhausted and wish to retire post haste."

Harold was dumb founded. He couldn't speak he was filled with such fury. His favorite daughter had run away and married. There would be a scandal for certain. People would say his Ashley was a loose woman and had become enceinte. He had lost his favorite daughter. His shoulders sagged. His dreams for her destroyed forever. He had been thrilled when Grant Wessex came along. His lovely little Ashley would have been the English Duchess he had always wanted for her. He could no longer paddle his Ashley, but he could punish her.

Grant touched Harold on the shoulder. "It's all right Lord Stuart. In this instance I believe the better man won."

"I'm sorry, Lord Wessex," Harold apologized with a heavy heart. "I wanted so much for the both of you. My Ashley would claim her title as Duchess. If you would forgive me, I need time to be alone."

Grant understood the old man's disappointment but had to admit he wasn't very disappointed at all. Instead he thought more about Celeste. The upstart Irishman had stood up to her father. He made Ashley his bride. He vowed he would visit the newlyweds



tomorrow and wish them good will. He wanted to know about this Grady. Perhaps he might learn a thing or two about life from the upstart Irishman.

Ashley and Grady were finally alone. Grady knew Ashley was a virgin, but she didn't know that age twenty-eight and nearly twenty-nine, he was also a virgin. There had been plenty of chances and invitations, but he had been raised in a strict family with high morals. Gus had warned him so much about the pox and other diseases he was terrified of using a professional. The only hope he had of making this wonderful for the both of them was remembering everything the salty crew discussed on the long voyages. He would also need to pull together his knowledge of husbandry. Was he kidding himself? He could barely think at all. His groin was growing harder and harder just having Ashley in the room with him. Grady also felt that Ashley was so much entwined with his life he didn't feel shy at all.

Ashley looked at Grady with great love. "Can you assist me with this gown? The buttons are on the back and a bit difficult to reach."

Grady moaned quietly and was next to Ashley. Her bare shoulders seemed to invite his lips. Carefully he unbuttoned the gown while savoring the sweetness of her shoulders with his lips.

Grady's gentle kissing was sending lightening shocks through her body. Heat was building in secret place between her legs. Her breathing became more labored and the dress seemed to be crushing her body. Ashley had never known or even seen a man without his clothes. Her mother discussed certain things with her, but nothing that could really prepare her for a wedding night. Still she didn't feel shy with Grady. As her body was heating she had the urge to rip his clothes off and have him touch that place that was warming and becoming wet.

The dress dropped to the floor. Ashley turned to face Grady. She smiled sensuously and began removing her stockings, garters, corset, pantaloons, and finally the chemise. The clothes dropped one piece at a time in the center of her wedding dress. She stood before Grady unashamed.

Grady choked and started tearing his clothes off. He didn't care for the studs, cravat, shirt or trousers. Everything was off of his body quickly. His body was on fire. His beautiful perfectly formed



wife stood before him. There was only one way to quench this fire. “Ashley,” Grady choked out.

“Grady,” she responded holding out her arms.

Grady picked her up from the pool of clothes beneath her feet. Her naked skin felt as soft as kid leather. His body burned for her. He placed her reverently on the bed and lay beside her. Instinctively his hand cupped one breast and his mouth lowered to tease the other. He felt Ashley’s leg entwine with his. Her body arched with a sensuality that nearly drove him wild. He tampered his need. She must enjoy as much as he surely would. Slowly he dipped his fingers into the honey sweet area of her femininity. It was warm and wet.

Ashley bucked when Grady slipped his fingers into her womanhood. If she felt warmth before, she was on fire right now. There was an ache inside growing with every minute. What this ache was she didn’t know. Instinctively she wrapped her arms around Grady. It was no easy task. Her arms barely made it around his muscular chest. Beneath her fingertips she felt Grady’s muscles. They were rock hard. She felt the strong cords of sinew. She was burning alive. “Grady,” Ashley whispered laving her tongue along his neck.

Ashley’s whisper and kissing was Grady’s undoing. He could wait no longer. His groin was bursting with heat and need. Slowly he positioned his body over Ashley. He was afraid his body weight might hurt her, but her legs were suddenly around his thighs. She was pulling him to her. Carefully he sheathed himself to thrust into her womanhood. He was pulsing with the wonderful ache of mating. Beneath him Ashley moaned, writhed, and twisted into him.

Ashley felt the pulsing heat of Grady so close to her demanding need. It was the answer to her ache. She knew this. Only Grady could make her better. He seemed to hesitate and it drove her mad. She locked her legs around his thighs and whimpered as she used her legs to pull him to her. She felt his satiny tip enter and she wanted to feel all of it. Then she felt him enter. It was wonderful. It was filling. Then she felt a painful tug. Was this what her mother told her about? Grady had reached her maidenhead. It would be painful, but then delightful. Ashley thought it would be best to get the pain over with as quickly as possible.

Grady felt Ashley tense beneath him. He felt the membrane he must break. He knew it was and would be painful. The last thing he



wanted to do was hurt his Ashley, but he was bursting. Ashley was so tight, warm, and welcoming. As he hesitated Ashley bucked pushing her body into his. She released a small scream as he felt the membrane tear. They lay a moment together when his cursed body took control. He moved in and out rhythmically as if that would ease her pain. Apparently it worked. Ashley was moaning sensually and in perfect rhythm. To his surprise she suddenly shook beneath him. Her spasm lasted for several moments. She was bright with sweet sweat, breathing hard, and her heart was racing. The spasm triggered his. His manhood throbbed with need of release. Grady drove into Ashley deeper and deeper until he exploded releasing his seed with his own spasms of ecstasy.

A wonderful feeling of euphoria surrounding Ashley took her to a height of physical pleasure you could not imagine. She was savoring the exultation when Grady grew inside her. He began pulsating. He drove deeper and deeper. To her surprise she exploded in that glory once again when she felt Grady explode. She felt the warmth of his seed depositing at the cone of her womanhood. Together they shivered in heights only two people can reach as one.



Chapter 5

Ashley stretched as she woke. Opening her eyes she focused on the smiling face of her husband. The sun was already high in the sky. They had made love several times during the night. Ashley would wake Grady with nips and kisses, or Grady had woken Ashley with nips and kisses. Ashley felt well used and quite content. She wondered if that is the way Grady felt.

“Good morning sleepy head,” Grady greeted smiling. He was feeling pretty damn good this morning.

“You slept in too, Mr. McGillinen.”

“I had good reason too,” Grady excused. His gray eyes were twinkling with merriment. “I just married a very demanding woman, Mrs. McGillinen. She exhausted me last night.”

“A veritable wanton,” Ashley teased.

“Oh God, I hope so,” Grady laughed and kissed his wife thoroughly ending with a slap on her buttocks.

“What was that for?” Ashley giggled. She ran her hands up and down Grady’s muscled arms.

“A good filly responds to a love tap,” Grady chuckled. “We need to get up and go shopping. If you don’t let me up now, I just may ravish you all over again.”

“That is not a bad thought at all,” Ashley murmured seductively.

“Oh no you don’t Mrs. McGillinen,” Grady responded leaving the bed in his all together. “This shopping is important.”

Ashley stared at the beauty of her husband’s body. She started her perusal with his broad expansive muscled shoulders followed by rock hard sinewy biceps. His chest had only a little hair that tapered down perfectly shaped abdomen to his navel. There a perfect vee shape on his hips to his manhood thick and long. His thighs were perfectly sculpted. He was indeed a specimen of what a man should be. “What is so important about shopping,” Ashley stated attempting a delay. She was back to other things on her mind.



“Stop staring at me like that,” Grady warned. “We’ll never get out of this bedroom until the birth of our first child.”

“Very well,” Ashley answered stubbornly. “I don’t understand what is so important about this shopping trip to rouse me from my warm comfortable bed.” She sat on the edge of the bed still staring at her husband.

“We need to buy you some clothes, my dear,” Grady offered with a grin. “I can keep you warm every night in your natural state, but a wedding dress and day dress will not make it for a trip back to Utah Territory.”

“Oh,” Ashley replied. She forgot she walked out of her family home with only the clothes on her back. Alyson had told her how furious her father was. She knew a visit to pick up belongings would not be welcome by Lord Harold Stuart. She rose from the bed and looked at the sheets. “Oh!” She stared at the large bloodstain on the sheets.

“Another reason to leave our bed. We are in need of a hot bath,” Grady suggested. He slipped on his denims. Without his underwear the woolen trousers would be itchy. He put on a comfortable homespun shirt and walked barefoot to the doorway. Pulling the bell for room service, a maid appeared and he requested a large breakfast. He returned to light the heater for hot water in the bathing area.

Ashley was brushing her dress hanging in the armoire, when Grady came behind her and lifted her up in his arms. He gently placed Ashley in the large tub filled with warm water and fragrant bath salts. Ashley felt Grady’s soothing hand rubbing soap on her body starting at her back, moving around to her breasts, down her abdomen to her womanhood. It was then Ashley realized she was somewhat sore and the bath would have a healing effect.

“You’re sore?” Grady asked worriedly.

“A little,” Ashley confessed. “I think we over did it.”

“We just might have. I was just as greedy as you,” Grady chuckled massaging the tender area. He moved to Ashley’s thighs, calves, ankles, feet, and then ended with her toes.

“Is it a western thing for men to bathe their wives,” Ashley teased. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen Papa bathe Mamma.”



“No, it’s not a western thing,” Grady chuckled. “It’s a Grady thing for his lovely wife. Get up now. I’ll help dry you off. Then I’ll dip in the tub.”

Several minutes later, Ashley had dressed in her clothes. She was used to freshly laundered under things, but knew this would only be the start of a different way of life.

Grady appeared in the room dressed in the eastern outfit, but he was wearing a pair of comfortable looking boots instead of the button hooked shoes the Boston men found fashionable. He extended his arm.

Ashley took Grady to all the Stuart family shops. She purchased several day dresses, three soft cotton and practical nightgowns, three chemise, four drawers, and was going to purchase three corsets when for the first time Grady vetoed the purchase.

“You won’t need those things,” Grady said distastefully pushing them away as if they were contaminated with typhoid.

Ashley replied with surprise, “It is standard apparel for today’s fashion. One simply cannot wear a ball gown without it.”

“One for the ball gown, but no more. If I see that torturous contraption on you other than that, I will personally remove it,” Grady threatened.

Ashley giggled. She couldn’t have agreed with Grady more. The corset was uncomfortable, and she herself had often called a torture devised by a man to make a woman suffer. “A ball gown?”

“Just one for now. We’ll buy more things from Virginia City and San Francisco later. We have to travel light when we return to the ranch,” Grady replied paying the shopkeeper in gold coin. “Next we’ll get you some shoes and a pair of sturdy riding boots. You do ride don’t you?”

“Papa spent a fortune in equestrian schools for all three daughters. Yes, I ride. Of course it is sidesaddle. I’ve heard women out West ride astride,” Ashley answered hesitantly. She was hoping he didn’t expect her to ride astride. That was something she felt she could not do, at least not yet. “Are we going to ride horseback to Utah Territory?”

“We’ll be taking a river route until Saint Louis, then we’ll ride to the ranch. We’ll be camping a lot. It might be a little rough for



you,” Grady revealed. He held his breath waiting for Ashley’s response.

“Will you be there with me the entire time?”

“Together like stuck glue,” Grady replied.

“Then it will never be rough.”

It was dark when they returned to the hotel suite. One of their stops was to purchase the finest sidesaddle and tack in Boston, or so the proprietor said. Gus was talking to someone in the lobby when they returned.

Grady waved Gus over. “Have you eaten dinner yet?”

“Nope!”

“Want to eat dinner with us?”

“Yep!”

“Something the matter?”

“Nope!”

“Something is up. You never respond with less than a fifteen-minute diatribe. These one word answers are unnerving.”

“Just hungry,” Gus responded. “Let’s eat. My stomach is a gnawin my backbone.”

“Who was that man you were talking with,” Ashley queried.

“Someone.”

“Did he upset you?”

“Nope!”

Grady shook his head. “Ignore him, Ashley. When he gets stubborn like this it’s like trying to pull a cat down the tree by its tail.”

Margaret was agitated. Harold did not come to bed last night. He had not come out of his study all night or all day. Currently the family lawyer was with him. The butler had informed her the master had taken sustenance, but would allow no one in the study. Margaret was certain this pique was all about Ashley. Even during their worst spats he had always come to bed. They vowed never to take a spat into the private chambers of their bedroom. That vow was never broken until now. Margaret continued to pace in the parlor wringing her lace kerchief. Alyson was sent to spend a few days with Audrey and her husband Henry Astor. Things needed to calm down. Margaret had never in her marriage known Harold to act like this. She was even afraid that Ashley might show up to gather her belongings. Instead



she received a note from Gus Bartley asking Margaret to pack all of Ashley's belongings and clothes. He gave the address of a Boston Freight Company that would ship all of it to a place called, Ely. At least Margaret had a place to correspond to Ashley. She blessed Gus Bartley for that. A mother couldn't be separated from her daughters forever. It was extremely late in the evening when Margaret finally retired. She expected to sleep alone in her bed once again when Harold came into the room with his valet behind him.

"Thank you," Harold told the valet quietly. "That will be all for the night." He climbed into bed and laid his head upon the pillow. "Margaret, she broke my heart."

Margaret decided not to respond. Harold was ready to talk and she wanted to hear it.

"I only wanted what was best for my girls. I love them. I've always loved them. Ashley broke my heart. I can't let her think it was all right to do that. I had to punish her."

"Punish?" Margaret gasped.

"I've changed my will. If I die before you all that remains the same," Harold explained. "If I die after you or when we are both gone the will clearly express that all three girls shall not inherit, but their offspring will inherit the estates, properties, and financial interests. You see Ashley set an example for Alyson. She'll get it in her head to marry that cadet."

"You wouldn't stop Alyson from marrying Jameson? He comes from a wealthy family in Maryland," Margaret defended.

"The women in this family aren't the only ones with a sense," Harold argued. "I've investigated that family. They don't have the wealth they pretend they have. They will make Alyson's life miserable for their jealousy of our bloodline. Yes, the boy loves her, but it will be hard."

"You won't make it harder for Alyson, will you?" Margaret pleaded.

"No, you have my promise. We will always be there for Alyson and Audrey."

"You won't soften about Ashley?"

"I can't and won't until my heart heals. It will be awhile, Margaret. Be patient with me," Harold replied sternly.

Margaret snuggled into her husband's arms. She loved Harold as much as she loved her daughters. Ashley had defied her father and



hurt him deeply. For the first time in days she felt confident that the rift would and could be mended in the future. She needed to help Harold heal by providing her love and support. She didn't bring up the wedding and her presence. Margaret sensed this was not the time to remind Harold.

Grady informed Ashley they would visit New York and Washington City for a week each and then return to the ranch. Ashley was excited and enjoyed every moment of their trips. Grady spared no expense. They stayed in the finest hotels, ate at the finest restaurants, attended the finest plays and shows, and shopped at the most exclusive stores.

Ashley continued to be amazed at her new husband's resources. He never blinked at any expense and enjoyed spoiling her more than her father. He bought her several pieces of jewelry including a pair of small teardrop diamond earrings.

Grady enjoyed buying things for Ashley and treating her like a queen. Things were going to be a bit rough when they finally returned to the ranch and he wanted her to have wonderful memories as they crossed the Great Plains to reach his Promised Land. He even provided Ashley with sheets of paper, quill pen, and expensively priced envelopes. He gave her quiet time every evening to write to her sisters and mother. Grady even encouraged her to send a letter to her father. When the letter was completed they would retire to their bedroom and make love until exhausted.

Two days before their planned departure a knock on the door to their Washington City Hotel suite surprised them. Grady opened the door to the countenance of Lord Grant Wessex.

Grady was silent. His teeth ground together. What did this man want? Ashley was his wife completely.

Grant sensed Grady's tension. "I'm here to see you, old boy. The best man won and all that. Hello Ashley. You look radiant." He pushed his way past the dumbfounded Grady McGillinen. Lady Stuart shared your letters with me. I understand you are planning to leave for the West this week."

Grady quickly regained his senses and stepped between Grant and Ashley. "And what is your point?"



"I'd like to join you. I want to visit the West," Grant explained stepping back. "May I sit down?"

"No," Grady said simply.

"Come on old boy," Grant pursued. "Fact is, I realized I was never in love with Ashley. There is someone else in my heart. It was for our love affair I was sent to America."

"I knew it," Ashley declared. "I always felt there was a true love in that heart that wasn't me. On the day of the accident I was crossing the road to tell you that your suite would never work."

"And then you did meet the true love of your life," Grant added. "I'm happy for the two of you."

"Good. Go away!" Grady snapped.

"Understand old boy, I've always had a bit of wanderlust and adventure. I've wanted to visit this wilderness of yours, but I've heard many stories of unscrupulous men and dangers of trusting them to take you out there. I have you. I already know you. I have absolute reason to trust you. Please take me with you."

Grady felt his resolve dissolve a little when Grant admitted his wanderlust. If anyone understood that, he would. If he hadn't had the friendship of Gus Bartley, he might not have made it either. Grant Wessex was correct with his information. A city slicker couldn't take a Sunday walk in Utah territory. Even the most professional tracker might perish in the wilds. It was best to join up with a partner, and even that was dangerous if it was a wrong partner.

Grady's silence gave Grant a small hope. "Look old boy, I'm not completely helpless. I've won rounds in pugilist rings. I'm a crack shot with pistols, rifles, and shotguns. I've traveled a bit and can adjust to most living conditions."

"Wanderlust?" Grady queried.

"Yes. I seem to have this need to explore new lands, old cultures, and experience different lives," Grant explained. "I am the only son of British high ranked Lord. Eventually I will have to take control of the family titles and properties. I want to live before I have to exist in the role to which I was born."

"Grady, let him come with us," Ashley requested taking her husband's hand. "I've talked a bit with Lord Wessex. He is telling you what is in his heart. He talked about trying to visit the West. He wanted to see it."



Grady sighed heavily. There wasn't anything he could deny his new wife. "Very well. There will be hard fast rules starting with you lose that title. You're a walking victim addressed as a Lord."

"Grant it is."

"Whatever Gus and I say is the law pure and simple. If you are told to do something it will be obeyed without question," Grady continued.

"My solemn obedience."

"Those clothes have to go. You look like a true green horn and they are impractical for the trail."

"You can help me purchase anything necessary."

"My wife is mine, no trespassing at any time. She will be respected as my wife."

"You have my honor," Grant answered quickly. He was becoming hopeful and excited.

"We have to get Gus's approval," Grady added slyly.

Grady had left the door open and Gus entered. He wanted breakfast and was waiting for Ashley and Grady. "Need my permission for what?"

"Lord Wessex here wants to come with us. He wants to see the Promised Land," Grady informed in a sarcastic tone.

"Yer got the wanderlust have ye?" Gus asked.

"That I have indeed," Grant beamed proudly.

"Kin ya take orders, shoot, and ride?"

"Yes, Mr. Gus."

"Git rid of them fancy duds, fancy words, and titles. Ya can come with us," Gus replied. He looked at Grady. "Every man should have the chance to see the Promised Land, even a fancy dude like that. Seems to me I met a fellow once that had the wanderlust. It proved a good partnership. My gut feeling tells me this will be the same."

"It's settled," Grant said happily. "Anyone for vittles? They call it that don't they?"

"Smart ass," Gus grumbled. "We calls it food and breakfast. I'm hungry. Let's eat."

The group boarded the train in Washington City to Philadelphia and then on to Pittsburgh where the Ohio River began. There they would board a riverboat that would take them to Cairo, Illinois. From there they would board another riverboat to Saint Louis,



Missouri on the Mississippi River. They would continue their journey by horse from there. Grady and Gus had left their mustang stallions in a livery in St. Louis.. When they arrived in the city, they would buy more horses for Ashley and Grant. They had pack mules for transporting foodstuffs and the few personal items they would need on the trail.

Ashley was staring at the river under the cover of a brilliant moon and a starry sky when Grady woke up to find her missing. "It is so beautiful. I've never seen so many stars."

"It's hard to see anything in a city filled with all the dirt," Grady chuckled. "You shouldn't be out here all alone. Some scoundrel might take advantage."

"Only this scoundrel," Ashley teased. "This boat has a strict Riverboat captain. I doubt anyone would cross him."

"He is intimidating all right," Grady agreed. The vision of the nearly six and half foot tall rotund giant of a man came to mind. The captain looked like he was built of brick. His crew showed absolute obedience and respect. One of those rules was that any lady on the boat would be treated with the highest respect. The captain even had his petite wife with him as he traveled the course of the river days and nights. "But dear wife, when I wake up in the middle of the night with amorous intentions and you aren't there, well it isn't good."

Ashley smiled and placed her hands on Grady's cheeks. She pulled his face toward her. "Kiss me you amorous husband."

The trip down the Ohio was uneventful. The government had cleaned up most of the snags and trees. Sandbars were normally a danger, but not to the skillful captain of this riverboat. At Cairo they changed riverboats that ranged up and down the Mississippi River. In a few days they were in Saint Louis. Gus seemed to change overnight. He seemed healthier and stronger. It was as if the return home was a force that gave him more life.

"Do you want to come with us," Grady asked Ashley. He had taken care of their baggage delivered to the hotel they would be resting in. He told her he and Gus would be checking on their horses and gear in the livery. "You could go directly to the hotel and perhaps enjoy a hot bath."



"I would rather be with you," Ashley responded taking her husband's arm. "I want to see this horse you kept talking about throughout the river trips with Gus."

"We talked all the time about Spirit and Rogue?" Grady asked unaware he had been doing it.

"Well, it was mainly the two of you disputing who had the fastest and sturdiest mount," Ashley laughed. "I really do want to see this horseflesh. I learned a lot about horses and really developed a love and interest for it." She had spent nearly half her life riding horses, reading books on horses, and learning about horses from the stable masters.

It was a short but dusty walk to the stables. Grady, Gus, Grant and Ashley entered the stables. Grady spoke to the proprietor who took him to four stalls at the end of the stable.

Grady went immediately to his horse, Spirit. It was a fine specimen of wild mustang. Spirit was a fifteen-hand Dun. His buttermilk colored dock and flank contrasted to his black mane, tail, and dark long socks. He was a dominant mustang stallion born into a wild herd. Grady had captured him. With the help of the Shoshone people he gained dominance over the stallion. Later they developed trust with each other. It became a loyal partnership between man and beast.

Gus went to his horse Rogue. It was a spotted blanket Appaloosa fifteen hands high also. Gus was given Rogue as a gift from Bear Hunter, a warrior of the Shoshone people and his friend and family. Bear Hunter was the nephew of Running Waters.

Grady stood next to Ashley. "Fine specimens of horseflesh."

"They are magnificent animals. They are strong and muscular for a long endurance. You can tell," Ashley admired.

"Mustangs, the horse of the West. They were bred wild and free after the Spanish lost or abandoned the Barb they brought here."

"Yes," Ashley concurred. "The environment altered with uncontrolled selection of the original Spanish Barb stock and created the new breed."

"Do you think we could find such horses for ourselves?" Grant inquired.



Chapter 6

“Where would we start looking,” Ashley replied absentmindedly. She was watching Grady with Spirit. He was talking to his stallion as he would an old friend. He patted Spirit’s crest. The horse nickered softly as if sharing secrets with an old friend.

“We wouldn’t know where to look, but I bet old Gus would know,” Grant bubbled with excitement. He missed riding. Every day on his father’s estate he would take an early morning ride on one of the many horses of his father’s estate. He felt alive on the back of one his father’s Irish Half Bred horses at over sixteen-hands. He would run on the grounds of his estate riding his favorite Irish steed, Connemara. Grant would run Connemara open as fast as the gelding would go. The day Celeste disappeared he ran Connemara to exhaustion. Nothing seemed to work. He would never get Celeste out of his mind.

Gus holding the stallion’s bridle walked Rogue toward them. “Ain’t he a beaut? He’s a fast as a twister on the Plains.”

Grant walked up to the horse and rubbed its nose. The Appaloosa nickered a friendly greeting.

Ashley noted a smile cross Gus’s face. “We were wondering where we might look at horse stock. I mean we will be purchasing mounts for the trip.” Ashley’s cheeks flushed at her boldness.

“We discussed the fact that you would be the one to help us purchase our mounts. You and Grady that is. We find ourselves envious of Rogue and Spirit.”

“It’s a fact you won’t find animals like ours here, but there is a ranch a few miles from here that offer good horseflesh. Grady and I talked about going there tomorree.”

Suddenly a huge longhaired dog came barking from the stable stalls where the mules had been housed.

“Max!” Gus called. “Come here ya mutt!”

Ashley choked, “Gus, is that a bear?”



“Naw, that’s my dog. Max. He’s a mountain dog. Bought him from a fella in Denver. Brought the dog’s bitch all the way from Europe. He sold the pups for a grub steak. He’s a faithful dog and can smell a stranger or trouble a mile away,” Gus introduced proudly. The dog weighing in at over 100 lbs jumped on Gus with front paws nearly knocking Gus down. Gus petted the dog and shook the dog’s large head with both hands. “Ya took good care of Hilda and Gertrude, didn’t ya boy.”

“Must be the mules,” Grant chuckled.

Gus finished playing with large dog and walked to Grant. “Grady is going for a short ride on Spirit while I ride Rogue. The two of you stay here with the proprietor. Don’t go anywhere. This town can be dangerous. Stay put!” he ordered. “When we get back, Grady will take Ashley to the hotel. Grant, ya and I are gonna buy ya some workin duds. Can’t let ya in this town lookin like a sissy. Yer would be shot and robbed in a day.”

Grant had been in enough rough areas of the world to follow Gus’s instructions without question. From the leers of the river rats at the dock, Grant knew he looked like a chicken ready to be plucked. He looked forward to the time with Gus. He knew Gus would explain the dangers here and ahead without holding back. Grant had enjoyed Gus’s company for the entire trip down the river. He reveled in the stories the old man shared with him. He also realized how dangerous certain places of this new land were because of those stories.

The next day Grady lifted Ashley onto the seat of what he told her was called a buckboard. Grant was in the back with Gus’s dog, Max. Gus rode Rogue.

“It will be rough,” Ashley repeated quietly. Those were Grady’s words. She began to comprehend their meaning the moment they left the town on the buckboard. Grady and Gus were wearing guns belted to their waists. There was a sheathed rifle in the buckboard wagon near Grant. Ashley looked closely at the people in the town as the buckboard slowly made its way through. Her senses were rigid with uneasiness. The majority of the men walking on the boarded streets looked dangerous. Their clothes were dirty. They were unshaven. Their boots were worn and dirty. Their hands seemed to pass constantly over the belted guns they wore. It was a menacing movement. Ashley was certain they were leering at her with malicious



thoughts. Until now, Ashley had lived in a fairy tale world provided by Grady McGillinen.

“What was that, sweetheart?” Grady questioned barely hearing the whispered statement. The timbre of her voice worried him. “Are you all right?”

Ashley’s faith and trust was complete with Grady. She felt she could share anything with him, even her trepidation. “The men of this place look dangerous.”

“Those men are dangerous, sweetheart. Stay close to me the time we’re here and actually any town we find ourselves in,” Grady warned. “This is a hard country and sometimes it draws hard men of a different caliber. It’s best to stay away from them and show no weakness.”

Ashley moved closer to Grady and tucked her arm into his. She raised her chin and looked straight ahead. “Like this?”

“Just like that,” Grady approved.

Ashley began relaxing a bit when the country opened up. She watched as they passed several sod houses. The women would come out and wave. Their children would follow them smiling and waving. There were good hard working people in Saint Louis along with the dangerous. It then struck her that Boston was just as dangerous. There were certain parts of the town where dangerous men dealt in death, extortion, and drugs. That section of Boston was violent and no respectable person went there. It must be true of all civilized cities. She chuckled at the thought, civilized cities.

“What’s that about?” Grady questioned feeling Ashley’s chuckle.

“Just some thought crossed my mind, and it made me laugh,” Ashley answered. “Is it much further?”

“The ranch is straight ahead,” Grady remarked raising the reins to point in that direction.

Ashley saw a large wooden framed house high on a hill. She saw several large barns and stables. There were wooden fences surrounding several sections of pasture and at least twenty horses grazing on some of them. The horses were magnificent animals. Ashley noted horse breed separated the stock. It was then she saw a Morgan. The horse had a star on its face, but was a solid chocolate brown. The horse seemed to sense her and raised its tail and nickered a greeting. She wanted that horse.



Grant was also viewing the horse stock when he spotted a Blue Roan Mustang. The horse was a magnificent specimen of strength and endurance. He would be willing to give the entire contents of his purse for that Roan.

Grady stopped the wagon in front the large two story wood framed house. There were lace curtains decorating real glass windows. The front of the lawn had several thriving rose bushes filled with blooming fragrant roses. An attractive young woman holding a baby boy about two years old greeted them. "Jonathan is down by stables. He bought some new mustangs and is checking them for breeding, Grady."

Ashley managed to tamper a grin. Things were different here. In Boston proper a lady never mentioned anything like breeding horses. Of course she knew a lot about breeding since she learned from the finest stable masters. As a child she asked all sorts of questions. If the stable masters didn't answer, she learned by hiding from them and eavesdropping.

"Of course they are not as fine as the animals you brought us, Grady."

"Thanks Lynette. I'll find Jonathan," Grady responded with a proud smile. "We'll take care of business and then I'll introduce you to my wife, Ashley."

Lynette smiled changing the boy from one hip to another. "Nice to meet you, Ashley. Grady's a fine man. He's brought us a good breed of wild mustang."

"Nice meeting you as well," Ashley responded. A little twinge of jealousy twisted inside finding out the attractive woman knew her husband. She was relieved when Grady introduced her as his wife. Grady was a catch she wasn't about to share with anyone, even a woman with a child. She knew she was being silly, but the jealous twinge just came on suddenly. Grady reined the horses sending the buckboard in the direction of the large group of stables. They finally stopped behind the stables. Several men were behind a corral filled with mustangs of a every size shape and breed. There were Piebald, Bays, Palominos, Roans, Appaloosa, and another Dun.

A tall handsome man looked up and waved to Grady.

"That's Jonathan," Grady announced to his wife as he lifted her from the buckboard. "He'll help us get you a fine equine mount."



Jonathan walked briskly to Grady. He shook Grady's hand vigorously while looking at Ashley. "Welcome Grady, you devil. You bring me some more horses? The army liked the last bunch you sold me. I made a fine profit. Indeed I did. Tell me who is this beautiful filly?"

"Jonathon Mallory, may I introduce my wife, Ashley McGillinen."

"How did you acquire a fine lady of such exquisite beauty," Jonathan oozed taking Ashley's hand and brushing his lips across her knuckles.

"You are full of blarney, Jonathan Mallory," Grady laughed slapping Jonathan on the back. "No, I haven't brought horses this time. I'm here to buy two of them for my wife and a friend. We'll need the best horseflesh you have for the trip back to the Territory."

"She is beautiful," Jonathan protested. "That is no blarney. Why she hooked up with Irishman like you will be a mystery. Maybe you're the one full of blarney."

"Thank you for the compliment," Ashley acknowledged.

"Little Jacob sure grew since I saw him last," Grady said conversationally. It was always good in horse business to discuss a little family in between. I didn't see Mary, Joseph, or Lucas."

"Mary and Joseph are in school this time of day. It's never too early to start and education," Jonathan explained. "Lucas will be napping. Did you see Lynette? She would be sorely upset if you didn't stay for the nooning. We're going to have another little one soon."

"You always said you wanted a big family," Grady teased. "I see you meant it."

"Course I meant it. I built this big house with six bedrooms upstairs for me and Lynette, didn't I?" Jonathan bragged. "So, you want to buy horses from me?"

"Yes, Grant over there is in need of a good mount. My wife, Ashley will need a strong and gentle mount for our trip back the ranch.

"Actually," Ashley hesitated for a moment and then straightened her backbone and resolve. "I noticed a Morgan in a pasture as before we entered your land. It was in the front western pasture."

"A Morgan?" Grady asked turning his attention quickly to Ashley.



"You have an eye for horseflesh," Jonathan congratulated. "I brought him and another stallion as well as two mares from back east five years ago. That one has sired three colts. He cost a pretty penny and is a valuable breeding stallion."

"Let me take a look at him," Grady requested.

"This way," Jonathan replied.

The group walked to the front pasture. In moments they were admiring the Morgan, Justice.

Ashley immediately started whispering Justice's name softly as an invitation.

The stallion's ears perked up with interest.

To everyone's surprise, the stallion walked to Ashley and nickered a greeting.

"Justice has never been a friendly sort before. He seemed to tolerate us, but always had an air about him that he was better than us two legs," Jonathan mused.

"Maybe he was waiting for a lady," Grady chuckled. "How much do you want for him?"

"I don't want to sell him," Jonathan sighed. "He's a magnificent breeding sire. His foaling rate is high and he's gentle with the ladies if you understand my meaning. Yet, I have never seen Justice act this way with anyone." He watched Ashley stroke Justice's long nose and talk to him quietly. Justice puffed out happily. His tail was straight and swishing. Jonathan knew horses and he saw a bond there. Those relationships were a rare sight in his business.

"Name your price," Grady pushed. "I know he's valuable both in flesh and breeding, but Ashley wants him. I'll pay for him in cash."

"Seems to me Justice has made his own decision," Jonathan laughed. "I'll charge you the price I paid for him and the freighting of him down here."

The two men shook hands.

"Where did Gus and that green horn go?" Jonathan asked looking around. He widened his range of vision and found both Gus and Grant involved with a Blue Roan Mustang in the east pasture. The mustang had just been saddle broke last month and was still skittish. They gelded him only three months before. No one was certain of the horse's nature. To Jonathan's shock Grant mounted him bare back and trotted him around the field. "I guess your friend found his mount."



The business was concluded and money exchanged shortly after that. Jonathan told Grady he thought the Morgan's previous owner had been a lady and the stallion had been ridden sidesaddle, but wasn't certain.

"Lynette has seen to our nooning," Jonathan announced after a houseman whispered into his ear. "Let's enjoy the meal."

Ashley was surprised when she entered the dining room. It was set with fine china, crystal, silverware, and linens. It could have been a dining room in Boston. The meal itself was of a simpler nature, but delicious. Ashley found she was ravenous and attributed it to the fresh air.

"Jonathan told me ya is gonna have another Mallory," Gus said between bites. "And yer still look as pretty as a little picture, gel. Marriage and motherhood becomes ya."

Once again Ashley blushed at Gus's unrestricted nature. It did however become obvious that Gus and Grady were long time friends of the Mallory family.

"I always wanted a large family. So does Jonathan. I can't believe how happy I am. When you found me Gus, I was at the end of my tether. Then you introduced me to Jonathan and my life turned around completely," Lynette offered beaming with joy.

"And you had faith in me," Jonathan added taking her hand. "We've built us a fine ranch, you and I."

Ashley saw a great affection and love when their eyes met. It was the way she felt when Grady looked at her. She would be a good wife to Grady she vowed to herself. As for Lynette and Jonathan? That would be a story Gus had to tell and she would wheedle it out of him.

The group returned to St. Louis late afternoon with their horse purchases tethered to the buckboard tailgate.

Ashley had been excited about Justice and couldn't wait to ride him until he returned to town. Those men they passed were still at the same place, in front of a saloon and their eyes raked over them once again. It was a chilling feeling Ashley had that went right down to her toes. She didn't feel comfortable again until Grady took her into the hotel room and told her to lock the door. She bolted the hotel door still feeling shaky from those men's evil stares. Grady told her he, Gus, and Grant would take their new purchases to the stable and come back for dinner.



“Ya feel em boy?” Gus questioned leading the Rogue’s bridle.

“Smell them too,” Grady said quietly. “Skunk for certain.”

“What are you talking about?” Grant inquired. “I don’t smell anything.”

“Hush up!” Gus growled quietly. “These be two legged skunk. It’s the vermin keeping the saloon in business.”

“They mean to ambush us?” Grant gulped looking for the rifle near his feet in the buckboard he was driving.

Grady walked in closer to the buckboard. “No, not here and now. This is the town. There are too many people around. These are back shooting vermin. They’ll watch us and wait until we leave.”

“We should contact the authorities and have them arrested,” Grant suggested quietly.

“On what charge? We can’t even prove they have been following us. They’re keeping out of sight,” Grady replied logically.

“So we let them ambush us?” Grant questioned nervously.

“No, we wait and ambush them when they attack,” Grady replied confidently. “We watch them as they watch us. Gus will handle that and not be found out. That old geezer is smarter than all them vermin put together.”

“I guess that is our only chance,” Grant capitulated.

“There’s always alternatives,” Grady elucidated. “This is just the first stage of one plan. Just remember it gets real dangerous out of this town. Stay alert and listen to Gus.”

The following day Grady brought Ashley back to the stable. He walked into the stall and brought Justice out with a rope halter. He spoke soothingly to the horse. He assured Justice his new mistress was waiting for him outside. He put the bridle on and then strapped the sidesaddle on the horse. “Now we’ll see if your owner truly had been a mistress. Grady noted the change in Justice stance once he cinched the sidesaddle. The horse took a perfect stance. Justice puffed out with pride and his tail stood erect. His ears straight and alert. “All right, boy. Let’s take you to your mistress.”

Spirit snorted. He didn’t like his master taking out another horse.

“I’ll be back,” Grady promised looking at Spirit. “This boy is for my lady. You mind your manners.”



Ashley found her feet bouncing up and down as she anxiously waited for Grady to bring Justice. Her heart raced when she watch Grady bring a saddled Justice out of the stable. "Hello Justice," Ashley whispered so softly only her horse would hear.

Justice raised his head high when he heard Ashley's voice. He began to prance as Grady led him closer to his new mistress.

"Take him for a short ride in this area," Grady suggested handing Ashley the reins and then offering his hands as a stand to mount Justice. "Don't go to far."

"I won't," Ashley promised. She could not forget the look in the eyes of the men in front of the saloon yesterday.

Justice responded to Ashley's gentle touch. It was obvious he liked her soothing gentle voice as she talked to him. They rode around the stable several times.

Ashley felt as if she was one with the horse as she rode him. She also felt he wanted to have a good run and he hadn't had one in a long time. Beneath her she felt the muscles flex in controlling the mighty sinews to stay in a slow trot. "We'll let you have a good run soon, Justice. I promise you."

Justice seemed to sense that her promise was good.

Ashley reined Justice back toward Grady. She smiled when Grady reached for her waist to assist her dismount. "Justice is magnificent, Grady. He's absolutely marvelous."

"A good investment," Grady agreed returning her smile. He once again felt his instinct send warning signals. There were being watched again. He reassured himself knowing that Gus had followed them. Gus would know what they were up against. He was probably so close to the rats they would trip on Gus. "Let's get back to the hotel."

Ashley was so happy she continued to bubble joy all the way back to the hotel. "When are we leaving for your ranch? I can't wait to see it. Everything is so wonderful."

Grady delighted in her happiness. It made him feel alive and at last he wanderlust was dwindling. Grady decided his future would be to settle down, make his ranch a home, and fill it with children.

Grady again left the hotel room for a talk with Gus and Grant. Ashley didn't think too much about that. Instead she ordered a bath and savored it for nearly an hour. She had just finished redressing into



one of her fancier dresses when she heard muffled voices arguing in the parlor.

“Taint right not telling her, Grady,” Gus grouched. “She needs to know what this is about.”

“I agree with Gus,” Grant concurred. “Ashley is a strong woman under that fluff. You know that.”

“Of course I know,” Grady grumbled. “I don’t want her to be afraid of the trip, that’s all.”

“If she don’t know what’s about to happen when it happens she’ll be more scared,” Gus argued. “She needs ta know!”

At that point Ashley pushed open the connecting door and walked into the parlor. “What do I need to know, Gus?”



Chapter 7

"It's nothing," Grady excused rising from the chair to take Ashley in his arms.

Ashley swatted Grady's arms when he approached. "Don't lie to me Grady. I don't think I could ever tolerate your lying to me. Something is going on. I've felt it. It's those men in front of the saloon, isn't it?"

"Tolt ya she was a sharp one, didn't I?" Gus sneered to his friend and partner. "Tell her, Grady!"

Grady took Ashley in his arms. He held her closely and spoke quietly but kept her eyes on him. "Gus followed them this morning when they followed us to the stables."

"And back to their saloon," Gus added.

Ashley put her hands on Grady's face. "What is it?"

"Tell her," Grant urged. "We are in this together."

"They're planning on ambushing us as soon as we leave town. They're waiting to find out where we headed and then jump us three or four days later," Grady informed.

"Tell her the rest," Gus ordered.

"They plan to kill us and take you..." Grady choked out. He wasn't afraid of that ever happening. He would kill all of them with his bare hands if he must. He was worried about how Ashley would react. "That is take use of you and then give you to a brothel in New Orleans."

"The Hell they will!" Ashley declared stubbornly setting out her chin. "I'm not that easy to conquer!" Her voice softened a little when she looked directly at Grady and laughed, "Except for stubborn barbaric savage Catholic Irishmen. What is our plan of action?"

"Tolt ya she had grit!" Gus chuckled.

"Well, we're going to let them ambush us. Then we attack them," Grant offered excitedly.

"Taint a game, boy," Gus chided.



“Sorry,” Grant quickly apologized. “I know it’s grave, but it is exciting isn’t it? I mean a battle we know we’ll win.”

“Don’t git cocky,” Gus warned Grant sternly. “Taint no good idea to be over confident. That’s when enemies win.”

Grant had the good sense to be humble. “You’re right of course.”

Ashley pulled Grady over to the divan and sat pulling him down next to her. “Since I have no intention of being anything in life less than Grady’s wife, tell me what you want me to do.”

“Nothin fer now. First I gotta find out jest how many there really are. I gotta find out what they’re a ridin, and their weapons. I got an idea to all of it, but I gotta know for sure. Gus relayed their plan based upon his over hearing the men’s plans.

The day had arrived to leave for the ranch. Ashley laughed at her appearance in the mirror. Her father would have apoplexy if he saw her. She was wearing the flat leather brimmed hat Grady had bought for her yesterday. She was wearing a practical homespun dress and the large heeled boots. In her arm was a heavy woolen coat for the cold nights they would be facing in the Great Plains and Great Basin.

“Could you still love this simple girl?” Ashley teased turning to Grady walking into their bedroom.

“This simple girl never looked more beautiful,” Grady answered pulling her into his arms. His mouth covered hers quickly. His kiss was passionate. The coming trip would make or break their marriage. He was fearful, but confident in his wife at the same time.

Grant named his Blue Roan, Billy. “It seemed to fit the horse’s personality.”

Ashley laughed with Grant. It was then she noticed Gus and Grady leading a line of mules. One of the mules had a small two wheel cart attached to it. In it were bedrolls, blankets, sundry items, and a large cylinder shaped object made of canvas. There were also several large poles about five to six feet long. “Grady, what is that?” Ashley asked curiously pointing to mule.

“A pavilion,” Gus informed. “Used in medieval times. Them knights would haul them all over. A camp tent.”

“I read about those,” Ashley grinned.



"Gus designed it and had a tailor in Virginia City make it," Grady elucidated. "We've used it quite a bit since then. Makes a fine shelter on a rainy or cold night."

"All the luxuries of home," Grant quipped cheerfully. He was clearly excited about starting this new adventure. He wasn't even thinking about the eight men planning to ambush them.

Grady and Gus shared their travel plans during breakfast. Their first stop would be a town called Washington about thirty miles away. It was a town and they would spend the night there. The next stop would be Jefferson City. It was a larger city and Grady told them it would have a hotel to stay in. The next stop would be Sedalia. After Sedalia he expected the land pirates to jump them. They would only be some ten miles from another small town named Warrensburg. The land was open with few sod farmers that could give aide or witness. They would have to strike there. The areas around Independence and Saint Joseph were heavily populated with settlers and pioneers. Gus was certain the land pirates were only acquainted with this small area of country. The land pirates would have to strike before they followed the Mormon Trail.

Ashley refused to get nervous until they left Sedalia that morning. Her nerves were jumping at every sound. Justice felt it and pranced nervously only calming when Ashley stroked his mane and spoke quietly to him. It helped calm her.

Gus reined up Rogue next to Spirit, "They're awaitin up ahead."

"I know, Spirit smelled them a mile back. They're keeping pace with us up ahead," Grady returned quietly. "Spirit is getting anxious. One of their mares must be in season."

"Yup, Rogue is getting pretty frisky," Gus agreed. "When we git them land pirates I think I'll let Rogue have a night out."

Grady laughed loudly, "If Spirit doesn't get there first." Grady turned serious stating, "I reckon they'll hit us ten miles out of Sedalia. There's a clearing perfect for an ambush five miles north of Warrensburg. There are no sod busters in that range and they know it."

"I know the place. I'll ride ahead jest before that and set up fer em," Gus grinned. "I knows jest what to do."

Grady rode Spirit next to Justice. The two horses ignored each other for reasons of their own. "It will soon be time. Do like Gus and



I told you. Stay next to Grant. The mules will get spooked. Don't get too close to them."

Ashley felt a quiver of emotion. There was going to be a gunfight. She was frightened. This day could change her life forever. She may never see Grady again. "I love you, Mr. McGillinen."

"I love you, Mrs. McGillinen," He smiled. "We're going to be fine."

It was then she noticed Max staying close to the lead mules Hilda and Gertrude. He was extremely alert and the hair on his back was nearly straight up. She never felt Max could be dangerous until now.

They road on for another three hours when it happened. Four of the eight jumped out in front of Ashley and Grant pointing their pistols.

"Hallo purty lady, wanna join our party?"

Ashley remained silent. Grady had warned her not to speak to them under any circumstances. He told her if she did that would give them a false sense of power. They would do something stupid and that would spoil Gus's plan. Instead she reined up next to Grant and stopped with him.

Max stayed between Hilda and Gertrude. He didn't make a sound, but his hair on his neck was now strait up.

"Yer man started riding back fer something," the robber grinned showing filthy teeth. "My two friends will take care of him. The old man will come back to my other friends. Scream if ya want, that'll bring 'em back faster." He walked boldly toward Ashley.

Justice smelled the man and started rearing waving his hooves menacingly over the head of the robber.

It took all Ashley's reserve to calm her Morgan.

"Control that animull. And git off."

It was then Grant saw the flash from Gus's shaving mirror. "Do as he says," Grant ordered quietly. "Slowly, very slowly." The men were watching her and it gave him the time to pull out the pistol Grady bought it in St. Louis. He had kept it hidden under his eastern jacket. Grady assured him the land pirates were convinced he was a complete greenhorn that couldn't shoot much less own a pistol. Grant waited until at Gus's birdcall, Max charged the lead robber.

Max jumped at the man before he could aim his pistol. Grant sighted the robber on the left and shot him. The surprised robber



pushed off the dog to see him run to the mules. He got up to point his pistol at Grant. He was too late. Gus took aim and the shot was true. Grant took aim and shot the third. Grady appeared and shot the fourth man.

Ashley watched in slow motion. The moments felt like hours. She wanted to scream and act hysterically as she watched the men fall one by one, but she wouldn't. Grady warned her it would be rough. She would meet the challenge.

Grady noticed all the color had gone out of Ashley's face. He spurred Spirit toward her. He watched fretfully as she raised her hands to her throat as if trying to breathe. As soon as he reached her he watched as her eyes rolled to the back of her head. In one swift movement he pulled Ashley to his mount.

Ashley watched in a daze as Grady galloped toward her. She tried to give him a smile, but the effort was futile. Her head began spinning. She raised her hand to her head with great effort and the world turned black.

Grady was never frightened this much in his life. He held Ashley's limp body closely. "Did she get shot?" Grady asked Grant frantically.

"No, I don't believe so unless it was a ricochet," Grant replied worriedly.

Gus rode out of the woods ordering Grady to put Ashley on the ground. Gus was quite agile for an older man when he jumped from Rogue and raced to Ashley's body on the ground. He bent his head to her lips and heard her breathing. He felt her neck for a pulse. It was erratic but strong. Then he looked for any wounds. There were none.

Grady looked almost as pale as Ashley. He found he lost his voice. Grady trusted Gus in almost everything including medicine. He had a knack for it. He seemed to be trained in it, but all Gus ever told him was that a Shoshone woman showed and trained him in many ways of medicine.

"She's fine, just the vapor," Gus diagnosed. "Bring me that canteen and give me yer kerchief."

Grant grabbed the canteen and Grady pulled out his kerchief so fast it was a blur.

Gus poured the water on the kerchief and gently placed the dampened cloth on Ashley's forehead. "Wake up gel, yer a scarin yer Grady."



Under Gus's tender machinations Ashley moaned and fluttered her eyes.

"That's a gel," Gus encouraged.

When her eyes were open, Grady took her in his arms. "You gave me a fright."

"Is it over?" Ashley squeaked.

"Yep, we took care of the bad men," Gus reassured quietly. He had two tied up ahead. The four that were in the field were dead. The other two robbers Grady had tied up in the trees behind them.

"You just rest awhile," Grady said lovingly. He carried her to a place close to the mules and called Max away from his charges. Max had returned to calm the mules by taking his stance between Hilda and Gertrude the lead mules. It kept the mules calm throughout the shoot out. Grady called Max and gave him the simple order, "Protect."

Max laid his massive body down next to Ashley and put his head on his paws.

Ashley closed her eyes. She was feeling ill.

Grady rose and said quietly, "Grant, Gus, and I have work to do. Just rest."

Gus was already pulling the pavilion off the cart. Grant was helping. The men put up the tent close to Ashley and put it together. Soon Ashley was being tucked in a warm comfortable blanket roll in the security and shade of the tent. Gus remained outside starting a fire in the middle of a circle of rocks. He pulled out the tripod and cook pot. Gus was an old hand at trail cooking. He pulled out potatoes, carrots, and onions. He cleaned them carefully and then cut them up. He poured a canteen of water into the pot. Gus added the vegetables, salt, and strips of beef jerky.

Grady and Grant made a travois and took the bodies to another clearing up ahead. They dug graves and buried them. Then they went to collect the other four. The two Gus had tied had disappeared. They were on foot and bootless. Gus had taken their boots, horses, and weapons. They probably hightailed it back to Sedalia. The other two men Grady had found were still tied and Grady brought them back to camp. "We'll take them to Independence and turn them over to the sheriff. They'll walk tied behind the mules."

The two escaped criminals did run to Warrensburg not Sedalia. They knew they were wanted men and would be caught if they didn't have a gun, boots and a horse. Rufus was a man that held a grudge



and wouldn't rest until he caught up with those two green horns and old man. No greenhorn and old man would ever show him up. They would steal what they needed from that small town and find them to kill them.

Ashley sat up from her rest to a fragrant stew. It was dark outside. Grady and Grant had returned from the grim task of burying the dead men. Both men washed in a nearby creek and were hungry.

Ashley walked out of the pavilion and sat next to Grady. "I'm really hungry."

Grady looked into her eyes with love. He didn't say a word but kissed her lips gently with his. There was no need to rehash what happened. It was a rough life and everyone needed to go on.

Ashley returned his kiss. She pulled back and smiled. "That stew is delicious. May I have a bowl, Gus?"

"Yer gonna be jest fine," Gus answered filling an enamel bowl with a ladle full of stew. "Eat this. It'll put hair on yer chest."

Everyone was silent for the rest of the way to Independence. They were quite a sight to the people of the town. This troupe with beautiful horses, sad looking mules, one mule pulling a wheeled cart, and two men following behind the mules tied up like hogs to a butcher. Grant held the string of eight horses at point. There were six mares and two geldings. The mares were in season. Spirit and Rogue had a little recreation one evening. The sheriff met them inside the main part of town. Grady told Grant to take Ashley to the hotel. Grady turned the land pirates over to the sheriff. They spent several hours relating and signing affidavits regarding the ambush. Six horses were turned over to the Sheriff. Grady and Gus kept the two mares that would certainly foal. The two robbers were placed in the jail and would be given trial in a month or two when the judge returned.

Gus insisted on what he termed relaxin for an extra day in Independence. Grant needed time to collect himself and agreed readily. It was the first time he had killed anyone. He had come to grips with the facts. It was their life or his, but he was still shaken. Grady had been concerned for Ashley. Her pallor hadn't returned yet and she had vomited in the morning. After a few crackers that Gus sent up to her room, that seemed to settle Ashley's stomach, she was well for the rest of the day.



They left Independence to follow the Mormon Trail as Gus called it. The group bypassed St. Joseph and rode directly to Fort Kearney. They would be near wagon trains of settlers and Mormons. It was the best route according to Gus. There would be plenty of people along the route. It was a good defense against the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Paiute warriors that had left their camps and were declaring war on the settlers. It would also be the best route to follow providing water and game for the long stretch across the Great Plains. They wouldn't keep the same pace as the wagon trains. They would make three times the distance every day the wagon train did. The trains often had military escorts when patrols moved back and forth along the trail.

Ashley felt alive traveling on her mount during the day. They made excellent time, arriving in Fort Kearney only a week later. It was the mornings Ashley didn't feel well. She kept the soda crackers Gus had given her back in Independence with the advice to eat them in the morning when she didn't feel well. It always worked. She was beginning to think Gus was a doctor educated in Harvard. She also was wondering if something was really wrong with her that Gus had diagnosed. She wondered if it was a deadly disease. She pushed the thought from her mind. If that were true Gus would have told her.

The travel across the Great Plains was beautiful, but the grasslands seemed to go on forever. It was one of those long riding days Ashley remembered her promise to Justice. There was an open meadow with free riding. Justice could have that open run. "Grady, I'm going to let Justice have a run,"

Before Grady could warn her or say no, she was off. He watched helplessly as his wife let the spirited stallion have its head.

Gus saw Ashley riding full out and nudged Rogue with the signal he knew was a race. Rogue's heart was competitive. The racing horse up ahead would be the one he would beat.

Grady let Spirit have his head. Spirit was a lover, but loved to run wild and free as any other stallion.

It was quite a sight for Grant. He would have enjoyed it if he hadn't seen Gus's serious face. He noted Grady looked frightened.

Rogue's muscles were bursting with speed. The Morgan was a challenge, but Rogue had the heart. It wasn't just a jaunt. Soon Rogue was nose to nose with Justice.



Gus reached his arm and grabbed the reins pulling Justice and Rogue to slow and finally stop.

Ashley was shocked when she turned to see Gus's face. She had never seen Gus angry before. "What's wrong?"

It took Gus a minute to respond. He was gaining control of his anger and his terror. Grady reined up behind him and was about to pull Ashley off Justice. She had put the fear of God into him and he was about to tell her just that when Gus blew up.

"What the Sam Hill did yer think ya were doin'? If that wasn't the stupidest thing a flighty female could do," Gus shouted.

Ashley was dumbfounded. Why was Gus calling her to task when all she did was enjoy a fast ride? She was incensed at Gus's tone. "I am not a flighty female!"

"Yer an ignorant flighty female!" Gus insisted angrily. "Yer were told to stay with us at all times and follow our pace."

"A little run is hardly..." Ashley attempted in countering Gus's charge.

"Damn foolish is what it were!" Gus condemned. His heart was still racing. She had no idea what danger she put herself in.

Grady was stunned with Gus's anger. Even he had only seen it twice and was glad it hadn't been directed at him.

Ashley was near tears. "I didn't know I was doing anything wrong," she defended.

"Ya do wrong when ya don't listen ta what yer were tolt," Gus returned heatedly. "Ya could a kilt yer baby if that horse hit a gopher hole at that run!"

Ashley was about to raise another defense when his words struck her with the blow of being pole axed. Her mouth dropped and stayed there.

Grady was about to protect Ashley when Gus's words struck him. He felt like someone had slammed him in the gut with a sledgehammer.

Gus turned to Grady, "Shut yer mouth, boy. Yer don't need no flies findin a home there."

"Kill my baby?" Ashley addressed being the first to recover from the shock. "Gus, what are you talking about?"

Gus didn't mean to tell them this way. It was obvious both Grady and Ashley were innocents in the matter of procreation. He had to continue with this because Ashley had scared him half to death and



he simply lost his temper. He was proud of controlling his temper, but he developed a fatherly love for Ashley. He couldn't allow her to possibly hurt herself because of innocence. She was an innocent of procreation and this wilderness. He realized there were times he would need to be more specific with instructions and this would include reasoning for the instructions.

Grady found his voice. It was squeaky but there. "Are you telling us Ashley is enceinte?"

"I guess I am," Gus concurred.

Ashley turned beet red from the top of her head to the tip of her toes. She should be the first to know such a fact. How could this man possibly know she was in this condition that was rarely even discussed in mixed company. Ashley was choking when she asked Gus, "How would you know?"

"Ya got all the signs," Gus informed casually sure of his current course now.

"Signs? What signs?" Grady demanded.

"Sick every morning, didn't ya notice yer breasts were getting bigger? That homespun dress is a stretching across right now. Before it were a little loose," Gus revealed. Then he hit them with the biggest sign. "Ashley ain't had her menses since yer were hitched."

Ashley felt red before, now she flamed red. She couldn't believe an older gentleman like Gus would be observant of women's menses. "How would you know that?" Ashley demanded in embarrassment.



Chapter 8

"I bought some menses rags fer ya before we left Boston," Gus informed. "It was something yer fergot when ya and Grady went and done yer shoppin."

"You what?" Ashley gasped.

"How would you know about such private things?" Grady questioned.

"I was hitched oncet," Gus replied quickly. "I tolt both of ya that, remember? A hitched man knows about these things after he's been hitched awhile."

Grady slumped on his saddle. "I'm going to have a baby."

Gus laughed, "Taint how it works Grady. Ya had a hand in makin the child, but Ashley's gonna have the child."

Ashley unconsciously patted her belly. She admitted her waist size had increased slightly. Her mother had told her that after a man and woman knew each other if the menses ceased, a woman was most likely enceinte. Ashley hadn't even thought about her menses at all. Gus was truly an observant and intelligent man. Still this was an embarrassing way to find this news out. "How long have you known Gus?"

"Since St. Louis," he replied honestly. "When ya first got the mornin sickness."

"Why didn't you tell me then?" Ashley pursued

"I was a hopin ya would figure it out fer yerself," Gus replied. "I figured ya would eventually, but today when I saw ya give that stallion its head ya scared me ta death. A woman in that condition shouldn't bounce around like that. What's worse would be if that stallion hit a gopher hole. Ya would've flown off that saddle and ya could a lost the child."

"Oh Gus," Ashley whimpered.

Grady leapt from Spirit's back. He lifted Ashley off the horse by her waist and placed her gently on the ground. He embraced Ashley and looked up to Gus. "We're pretty dumb, Gus. Do you think anything happened?"



“Don’t think so, but let’s set up the pavilion and rest a spell,” Gus suggested. “We done made good time so far. In two weeks we should make Fort Bridger.”

Grady lifted Ashley into his arms and walked her to a clearing near a creek. He laid her gently upon the grass and placed his hand over her abdomen. “We’re going to have a baby,” he said with wonder.

“I know,” Ashley chuckled. “I was just informed also.”

They both laughed and kissed each other with great happiness.

Grant had ridden up to Gus by this time. “What the Bloody Hell is going on?”

“I finally tolt them young’uns ther gonna have a child,” Gus complained. “Can’t believe how innocent some people can be.”

Grant raised his brow with surprise. “Well I’ll be.”

“Come on,” Gus ordered. “We got a pavilion to put up. We’re gonna rest here awhile.”

They arrived in Fort Bridger eighteen days later. Grady and Gus were recognized by the commanding officer and all were invited for dinner in the officer’s mess. There was some trouble ahead. A few rebels from the Bannock Shoshone nation were attacking settler camps and wagon trains. They were stealing what ever they could get. Sometimes there was bloodshed. Many on both sides died. The commander warned Grady and Gus of possible trouble.

“Injuns are no more trouble than them land pirates that attacked us outside of St. Louis,” Gus told the commander. “If it has two legs you got good and bad.”

“That is the truth,” the commander agreed. “I have just as much trouble with miners, settlers, as well as Indians. Tell me about this attack.”

Until that dinner Ashley had felt quite fortunate. The only trouble they encountered had been with the land pirates. She had heard horrible stories about Indian attacks on settlers. She was a bit frightened now especially with her baby growing inside her. She would talk to Grady about those Indian stories as soon as possible. Her chance came that evening. The commander gave Grady an officer’s cabin to use for the night.

Ashley couldn’t believe the simplicity of the cabin. There were cracks in the chink that allowed breezes. It was small in size



about ten feet by twelve feet. There was one window with oilskin. The floor was dirt. A pot bellied stove was fitted with a small chimney through the roof in the far western corner. A small cot with a tick mattress, simple sheet, small feather pillow, and quilt stood near the pot bellied stove. Ashley couldn't imagine the officers of the east living in a place like this. She was a lady enough to appreciate the commander's generosity, but she was far more comfortable in the pavilion Gus designed. This offered privacy for a man and wife, but Gus and Grant both made certain she and Grady had privacy. Their copulating time had not dwindled by much along the trail at all.

Grady didn't care if he was in a cave, he was alone with Ashley and he was amorous. He started to unbutton Ashley's fancy dress she wore for the dinner. To his surprise Ashley pulled away.

"Grady, there are some things I want to ask you about," Ashley interrupted. "It's important to me. I want to know everything and I want you to be truthful with me."

"Can't we discuss this later," Grady suggested. His mind was on loving his wife. He really wasn't interested in conversation at the moment.

"No, Grady!" Ashley declared. "You and Gus tell me the things you think I should know, like gophers, snakes, bears, and outlaws. You've never discussed Indians. I've heard stories back east. The things I heard were horrible. I want to ask you to tell me about these people. I have a right to know and this time I'm asking about them."

Grady sighed deeply. His lust would have to wait. Gus had told him privately that a woman carrying a child gets emotional on occasion. He warned him to be sensitive to these moods. Grady guessed this was one of those moods. "What do you want to know?"

"Do they really kill you and take your scalp. I mean take a knife and cut off the top of your head?"

Grady pulled Ashley to him and they sat together on the bed. He figured it was going to be a long night. "Yes, just like the British and French taught them. You see, the people didn't know about that until the British and French offered bounty on the piece of scalp they brought. Scalping wasn't a people invention. Originally it was a European invention. Before the War of Independence the French and British fought each other with the innocent scalps of the pro British or pro French pioneer."



Ashley was astounded. “How do you know this?”

“I worked on a whaling ship and met a lot of sailors. Some of them told stories their parents and grandparents had told them. The British had pressed some of them during the War of 1812. Those sailors learned of stories from the British. The stories were used for fear, but the sailors learned a great deal from their service in the British Navy,” Grady explained. “I even heard a story that some pioneers were afraid of Indians on the East Coast. Those pioneers purposely gave them blankets infected with cholera. Those blankets killed off nearly the entire people nation.”

Ashley was shocked, but she had to know more. “Is it true Indians kill women and innocent babies?”

Grady knew Ashley would be frightened, but he promised to be truthful. “Some have brutally killed families. It is true, but in my own land of Ireland a British Army under Cornwall marched across and killed thousands of innocent men, women, and children. In European History there were always campaigns that brutally killed innocent men, women, and children,” Grady informed. “Some militia and settlers have gone into peaceful villages and brutally murdered innocent Indian men, women, and children. It is a senseless brutality that knows no color or race difference.”

“Like the Spanish Inquisition?” Ashley asked understanding the reality of her husband’s words. “There are so many stories in history. When Jesus the prophet came to teach peace, he was betrayed by his own people, tried, tortured, and hung on a cross to die.”

“It’s exactly like that,” Grady responded. It was difficult to discuss these unhappy subjects when he was as happy as a man should ever be allowed. “There is no rhyme or reasoning behind the sick minds that are given or take power and use it to kill.”

“Grady, is it true the Indian warriors take men alive and torture them?”

“That is only partially true,” Grady replied with a hint of mischief. He wasn’t certain Ashley would believe this, but he promised to tell her the truth.

“Partially?”

“Yes. It is rare for a warrior to bring any live male captive back to the camp. When there is a battle, the people see it as a battle to the death. It doesn’t matter which side you are on. It is a battle to the death. A warrior has contempt for a survivor. It is beneath the



warrior's dignity to acknowledge a weak survivor. The warriors turn the captive over to the surviving women of warriors lost in battle. The mothers, wives, and sisters take their revenge on the captive. Only a few nations practice that."

"Which nations?"

"I don't know all of them, Sioux, Comanche, Apache, and Ute are a few."

"What type of torture do the women do?"

"Again, whatever the Europeans taught them to do," Grady answered. "Burying a body in the dirt up to their heads. Then pouring sweetened syrup over to attract ants. This was a popular Russian punishment. Attaching an appendage to a horse and pulling in four directions was a common Spanish torture introduced to the Indians about two hundred years ago. Slicing the skin off a body while it's still alive. That was a popular European torture. Then of course there is the popular torture of tying a body to a wagon wheel, igniting fire to it and sending the wheel rolling down a hill. That was used by the earliest pilgrims for witches."

Ashley remained silent as she digested what Grady told her. "Of course, whatever I have heard about the Indians here is the same things written down in history. Do they sacrifice humans like the Druids?"

"I've heard of such things, especially with the Southernmost Indians. There might have been such a thing with slaves of the Plains Indians. I've only heard of it happening."

"Slaves?"

"Yes. When a camp raids another camp women slaves are taken," Grady answered.

"Are they tortured, beaten, or raped?"

"Generally yes and no."

"What type of answer is that?" Ashley demanded.

"Most Warriors would never touch a white woman. White women are considered bad magic for a warrior. There have been rare occasions when a warrior falls in love with a white captive and marries her, but it is very rare. They are not tortured, but the women of the camp will beat or switch them until they learn their duties and do them correctly."

"But I understand there are a lot of mixed blood children out in the west," Ashley stated.



“That there are. It is white men that took Indian women and created lots of children. Some of these trappers adored their wives and treated them very well. There were others that were extremely abusive and cruel to their Indian wives and children or Indian women in general.”

“I see your point,” Ashley conceded. “You are telling me I have no more to fear from Indians than I do from our so called civilized society.”

“I guess that is what I am saying,” Grady responded. “You have more to fear from misunderstanding nature. There are great rattlers, mountain lions, bears, eagles, and other natural wildlife. If you don’t understand their rules it could cost you your life.”

“Grady, you are the most intelligent man I know,” Ashley admired.

“Actually, Gus is the most intelligent man you know,” Grady teased to lighten the mood. “I was a wet behind the ear kid when I met Gus. He taught me everything I needed to know to survive. Most everything I told you was what he told me. Like you, I had read all about history and humanity. It was Gus that put it together like that to help me understand all these things. Knowing the rules of where you are can save your life.”

“And you taught this to me,” Ashley sighed happily. “I think I have a lot more to learn.”

“That is very true!” Grady chuckled. “Like how to keep a man happy when he has his wife all alone.”

“I think I can learn that quickly,” Ashley answered pushing Grady down on the bed and climbing on top of him. She kissed him as she deftly opened his shirt buttons. Her hands slowly massaged his chest as her lips left his and laved his throat going down further until she stopped at his nipple and started suckling. Her hands unbuttoned his trousers and invaded his private area causing a swelling erection.

“Holy Mary Mother of God,” Grady gasped. “I hope I don’t hurt the baby with you being such a quick learner and all.”

“Gus said, No. He said that wouldn’t be until later,” Ashley replied moving her head down to Grady’s navel.

“You asked him?”

“Didn’t you say he was the smartest man I knew,” Ashley giggled wickedly.



“Damn! Who the hell cares,” Grady inhaled sharply. He picked Ashley up with his arms and had her beneath him instantly. He raised her skirts, pulled down her drawers, and plunged into her heated warmth.

They rose together in the physical pleasure and together enjoyed the orgasm of mating. Throughout the night Ashley let Grady know what a good student she was.

The group restocked supplies at Fort Bridger’s sutler. They rested a few days, learned all they could about renegade Bannock sightings and set out for Grady’s ranch. At the rate of speed they were traveling it would only be two weeks before they arrived at Grady’s ranch.

Grady was anxious to get Ashley to the safety of his ranch. He had surrounded himself with good people of every nationality. Ashley would live a comfortable sheltered life at his ranch. She would be safer in his ranch than in Boston City. He smiled when he thought he met her because she was almost killed by a runaway wagon in that city. Now he was married to his Ashley and they were expecting a child together. She wouldn’t have to struggle for anything like the settler’s wives they met along the Platte River. He was proud he could be a good provider for his Ashley. He knew his father would have been a better provider if he didn’t have the domination of the Bloody English. Yet Gus had taught him that all men were not equal either by law or personality. He had learned to like Grant, and he was a Brit. Contemplating these thoughts, he chuckled. All these thoughts were instigated because of his Ashley.

“Wool gatherin agin, boy,” Gus taunted strapping the pavilion down tight in the two-wheel cart. “No time fer that. We got work ta do.”

Gus told Ashley there were now in the Great Basin. He warned her about staying close to camp. There would be rattle snakes, fox, coyote, wolves, mountain lions, bears, and even mountain goats were dangerous at times. He told her what Grady had told her. They were in the animal’s element and territory. He promised he would teach her their ways as he was taught by the Shoshone, but it would be a little at a time.

“I promise I will follow the rules,” Ashley vowed. “I have to take care of my child just like the other mothers of this land.”



Gus understood her meaning and beamed her a smile.

They were in high mountain country two days later. This time Ashley felt truly alone. The Mormon caravans stopped just outside of Fort Bridger. There would be no sod houses or people. This part of the trail was bereft of settlers. This was truly the wilderness. Studying Geography, Ashley knew the West Coast was being settled. San Francisco was a large city and Carson City and Virginia City were growing. Grady's ranch was close to mining settlements, but this area was a wilderness.

"How are you doing, my little Mama," Grady questioned pulling Ashley close to him.

Ashley had finished helping Gus make a hearty meal. Along the trail she had coerced Gus into teaching her how to trail cook. It was completely different than cooking over a black iron stove in Boston. The recipes were similar, but cooking was completely different. She had imagined Grady's ranch would be similar to that cabin she shared with Grady at Fort Bridger. It didn't matter where they lived as long as they lived together. It was important to become part of your environment and she would. She would be the best wife for Grady she could be. "We are doing wonderfully. This cave is cozy and perfect for a delightful night's rest. What more could a woman ask for than a good meal and a loving husband?"

"Nothing more than a loving wife and a good meal," Grady returned.

Grant took first watch. It had been a quiet night when they fell asleep, but the soulful howling of a coyote calling to its mate soon wakened Ashley. Coyote was the first animal Gus had taught her about. She smiled remembering Gus's words. *Coyotes don't like people overly much. Smart animals!* She remembered that Gus said that about most animals. Grady was no longer in their bedroll. Perhaps that what had woken her? Ashley was used to the steady breathing and heartbeat of her husband when she slept in his arms. Grant was sleeping in his bedroll. Gus wasn't in his. That frightened Ashley a little. Why would both of them be gone at night? Then she became aware of Max barking furiously. She heard a strange but bone chilling growling. Without thinking she stepped out of the cave. She spotted Gus near Max. Gus was calming the mules. Max was in the forefront facing down a large mountain lion and barking ferociously. She uttered, "Gus." She was fearful for the old man and wanted to



know where Grady was. Could he have been killed by the mountain lion? Ashley couldn't bear the thought. For some inexplicable reason she felt she could protect him. Fumbling in the dark she began walking down the path toward the mules.

The movement caught the attention of the mountain cat. It growled at her.

Ashley stood motionless for a moment. The cat stared at her and she felt a connection. She opened her mind to it. Gus had told her that this was their home and humans were the invader. Ashley returned the stare. Instinctively Ashley knew the cat was a female. She sensed there were cubs and the mother was hunting for them.

It was then the cat raised its head and seemed to smell something.

Ashley knew the cat was smelling her. The cat must have known Ashley was carrying a cub, because the cat suddenly turned around and ran into the scrub brush along the rocky ledges. Max calmed down and Gus looked up at Ashley.

Like a silent mountain lion Grady leaped from a ledge above. He landed directly behind Ashley and gave her a bite in the neck. "That sweetheart is how a mountain lion hunts," Grady growled. "You don't know the cat is stalking until it springs upon the prey and bites the neck to break it. Just like I should do to you. You gave me a fright coming out like that. That cat could have turned and attacked you in defense."

"No, she wouldn't have done that," Ashley stated in assurance. "She's a Mama cat and was just trying to feed her cubs. She knew I was a Mama. She knew I would defend my cubs. She decided she would work on a different dinner for her babies."

"You know all that do you?" Grady chuckled. His wife wasn't shaking in terror like he had anticipated.

"Yes, I do know all that," Ashley replied saucily. "And you can bite me on the neck any time you want." She made small sounds deep in her throat.

"You purr nice like a pretty cat," Grady chuckled. "I love you my adorable cougar."

"Meow," Ashley laughed.

Grady swatted her bottom. "Let's check on Gus and Max."



“That was grit staring down the she cat,” Gus praised addressing Ashley. “We weren’t a goin to hurt the Mama. Max was a scarin her off. Mountain cougars don’t much like big dogs barkin.”

“I noticed that,” Ashley grinned. “I don’t much care for Max’s ferocious barking myself. Are the mules unharmed?”

“Max wouldn’t let no cougar hurt em,” Gus answered petting the massive head of his dog. “Grady, Max, and I knew the cat was a lookin over the mules for a dinner fer two days now. Cats hunt at dusk and dawn. We knew the cat would strike today.”

“At dawn,” Ashley remembered Gus’s words. The sun was rising in its brilliance. “That is why you were both on watch now.”

“Yer gettin smarter every day,” Gus praised.

“I wish I knew more, like knowing she was around for two days,” Ashley sighed. “I didn’t see her.”

“Don’t need to see everthin to know its a there,” Gus instructed. “Rogue is from a wild herd. He let me know.”

“How?”

“Just like Spirit, he put his ears back and snorted whenever he caught the scent. Spirit fidgeted when the cat was near,” Grady explained. “Gus started checking for signs when he found the cat. Cougar’s are hard to spot. They work at not being seen. They get their dinner by surprise.”

“What’s going on?” Grant called from the cave opening.

“Time fer food,” Gus announced. “Since we’re up.”



Chapter 9

Ashley started to notice things she hadn't before. Gus spent time at the campfire telling her secrets of the wilds. She noticed the birds bursting from branches. That was a sign there was a predator nearby or something or someone had come in suddenly to frighten them. It meant a presence of some sort. When she saw buzzards circling she knew it meant something had died. When she could see what the buzzards circled and flocked to, she saw it was the remains of a dead animal. Gus taught her the different birdcalls, the sounds of the animals and sometimes what the sounds meant. To Ashley this education was more complex than any academic study she had ever pursued.

"We're bout a week from the ranch," Gus announced as he and Ashley rode down a narrow path between mountainous rock. "I think yer gonna find a big surprise when we git there."

"A surprise?" Ashley asked wondering what Gus meant this time.

"Yep. I think it's a gonna be a big surprise fer yer after bein in this wild land travelin," Gus replied with a broad smile. "Big surprise."

"Well then, I can hardly wait," Ashley chuckled. "Where are Grady and Grant?"

"They went up ahead ta hunt us some supper," Gus informed. "That Grant ain't half bad. He's smart and learnin real quick. Good hunter and good instincts."

"Why Gus," Ashley chided. "I do believe you are starting to like Lord Wessex."

Gus snorted, "Taint no lord I like. Grant ain't too bad."

They heard the rifle shots and saw the birds disperse into the air.

"They're about a mile away," Ashley commented.

"Yer gettin good at reading trail sign," Gus praised. "I'm proud of ya."



"That is about the highest compliment I could ever receive, Gus," Ashley appreciated.

"Think nothing of it. Yer a good woman, Ashley McGillinen."

"I've been thinking of a name for our baby," Ashley conversed casually. "If it is a boy I would like him to have your name, Augustus."

To Ashley's surprise Gus began to choke.

"I never figured ya ta be a cruel woman," Gus spat out.

"Brandin a kid with a name like that is five times worsener than Comanche torture."

"But Gus," Ashley explained. "Your name is a noble name. A Roman Caesar was named Augustus."

"Brand Grady's child with that name and I'll never speak to you again," Gus threatened in perfect English.

"You slipped again," Ashley chuckled. "Harvard came out again."

"Dag nab female!" Gus laughed. "Grady is in for it with a wife like ya."

"If you hate that name so much, why didn't you change it with your persona?" Ashley inquired.

"My maw liked it," Gus answered contrarily. "Don't mean that I did."

"And If I like it?"

"Don't brand a kid with it or yer gonna never have me talk ta ya again."

Ashley was still chuckling as Gus rode off in a huff. At the bottom of the ravine Grady was waiting for her.

"Come to me Mrs. McGillinen. Your bath awaits my lady," Grady said bowing low before her.

Ashley allowed Grady to lift her from Justice and walked with him down a narrow and somewhat damp path. It was a warm June day. Today's trip had been hot and dusty. Ashley had been perspiring since noon. She truly would have loved a hot bath, but knew this would be another creek swim and a bar of homemade bar soap. "Gus and Grant are otherwise occupied?"

"Making our dinner, your ladyship," Grady teased.

Ashley was in good humor and returned a barb in good humor. "Then I would greatly appreciate a warm bath."



“Your wish is my command,” Grady grinned leading her down the rock path.

They came upon a crystal clear pool with an unusual odor about it. This time Grady didn’t go in first and cajole her in. He took off his shirt, but instead of removing the rest of his clothes he walked over to Ashley and pulled her unbuttoned dress with her chemise down over her shoulders. His mouth followed to suckle on an exposed breast as his finger worried the nub of the other.

It didn’t matter where or when they made love. The fire between them burned hot.

“Our baby is getting bigger,” Grady commented with delight. His large hand palmed the expanding abdomen. Sensually he untied her drawers and slid them over her hips to fall down over her legs.

Ashley was dreamy with desire expecting Grady to make love to her on the ground by the pond when to her surprise Grady picked her up. His one arm was beneath her knees and the other supporting her back. She wasn’t certain how or when, but they were both naked and Grady was taking her directly to the pool. “Stop it!” Ashley struggled in his arms. “You know I don’t like cold water. I need to get used to it.”

“Have faith in me,” Grady said whispering into Ashley’s hair. He walked into the water

To Ashley’s surprise the water was warm. Wonderfully warm!

Grady took her into the middle of the pool when it was hip deep on him. The water was just under Ashley’s breast.

Ashley felt Grady’s manhood rise and stiffen. He picked her up again. She anchored her legs around his body. He slid into her womanhood and was given the ride of her life. Once they were both spent, Grady told her to stay put. She watched him walk out of the pool. The water glistened on his back. The sun was low in the sky casting a golden glow on his body. He looked like a Greek God with his broad shoulders, taut chest, slender abdomen, tight buttocks, and muscular thighs. Ashley couldn’t believe her own lusty thoughts. Who would believe the lady of Stuart mansion would be such a wanton. The best part was that she didn’t care or worry about such thoughts anymore.

Grady was back with bar soap in his hand. It was a fragrant soap. It smelled like roses. He soaped lather with his hands and reverently started washing Ashley. He adored his Ashley. She was



heaven and earth to him. This pool was a surprise he had kept from her until now. He knew it would be a real treat to take a hot bath after a long time on the trail. He and Gus often used this hidden pool for the same task when they were out hunting with Cougar's Paw. Grady chuckled to himself. Cougar's Paw and Morning Song would be a real surprise for Ashley. He had been battling with himself for days now trying to figure out a way to explain his friends. He loved her with his life. They had discussed the imbalance of bigotry, but he wasn't certain how she would react to his deep friendship with Shoshone Indians.

"Where did you get this soap, Grady McGillinen?" Ashley asked reveling in her bath. It was an accusatory tone. "You didn't pick this up on a trail and we haven't seen a town since Fort Bridger."

"Astute young wife," Grady laughed. "I bought it at the Fort Bridger sutler."

"Grady, I love roses. I love red roses the most. The flower and fragrance makes me feel happy and content," Ashley mused. "You must be my red rose, for that's the way I feel when I'm with you."

"Mmm," Grady agreed. He bent his head and laved his tongue over Ashley's inviting neck. His hands once again played with Ashley's soapy breasts. He suddenly slipped on a rock and the two of them plunged into the pool with a splash.

They stood together laughing riotously.

"I did need to wash my hair," Ashley giggled taking the soap lathering it into her hair. She handed the soap to Grady. "Here wash your hair."

After their bath they laid on the beach until they were dry. The sun set as they dressed. There were many mountain lions in this area and they would be hunting at this time of day. Ashley and Grady made their way back to the camp quickly.

"I kin smell the two of ya a mile away," Gus grumped at Grady and Ashley before they appeared in the clearing. "At least ya won't smell like an inviting dinner for a cougar, bear, or wolf."

Ashley had long learned not to doubt all of Gus's uncanny senses. She was learning more and more every day from him.

Grady helped Ashley seat herself by the campfire and sat between her and Gus.



“Ya smell mighty purty, boy,” Gus chuckled. “Smell purty like one of them roses.” He couldn’t stop laughing. He laughed so hard he rolled onto his side.

Grant tried to maintain a straight face. He found he couldn’t and soon he was laughing riotously.

“That’s enough,” Grady grumbled at Gus. Even he couldn’t maintain a sober face. He did smell pretty. He let a bubble chuckle come out. The bubble turned into laughter. He was soon joining in the joke.

Ashley was laughing hard from the beginning of Gus’s jibe. She was in tears.

Max turned his head from one human being to another cocking his head from side to side. He eventually decided whatever was ailing these humans was no longer interesting. He put his head down on his paws and waited for his scraps from the dinner.

Again Grant took first watch after the meal. Grady and Gus were about to enter another shelter cave for the night when Max started barking furiously. Gus was already alert and Grady took his cue from Gus.

“Ashley, get into the cave,” Grady ordered sternly. “Stay there. I’ll be with you soon.”

Ashley obeyed grudgingly at first, but then remembered the child growing within her. She had to protect her child. She went in the cave but positioned herself on the bedroll to see everything that was happening at the camp. Gus and Grady were standing up and their guns drawn from their holsters. They were both looking at the same place in the darkness. She gasped when two Indians suddenly appeared at the campfire. They were warriors. One was holding the other. She smelled blood. Gus’s training was working. She was learning different odors. She wondered if more of them would suddenly appear. She heard Gus talking in a strange language.

“Owl feet,” Gus addressed in Shoshone. “What happened to Elk Horn?”

“Settlers got him,” Owl feet replied. “He was in a Mormon camp trading when a settler accused him of leering at one of his daughters. The men jumped him and whipped him. He hardly has skin on his back. I wouldn’t go to the camp. I don’t trust large white camps. I watched from a hill. There was nothing I could do. It was just the two of us. I waited until full night. I was afraid those settlers



had killed him, but he was alive. I cut his bonds and took him with me.”

“Ya built a travois,” Gus said knowingly. “How long have you been riding?”

“Three days. I used medicines, but his fever is high,” Owl feet answered. “I saw your campfire. Then I smelled pretty flowers. The Great Spirit whispered to me to come here for help. Help Elk Horn, please.”

Grady knelt by Elk Horn and assessed his wounds. “He does have a high fever. We need to bring it down.”

Grant came out of the woods putting his rifle down. He had it aimed on the Indian when they came to the campsite.

“Grant, get my medicine box on by the mules,” Grady ordered.

Grant had loaded the box many times and knew exactly where it was. Max followed him secure with the knowledge more friends had joined his master. He was acquainted with Owl Feet and Elk Horn. It was his nighttime duty to stay and protect his mules, Hilda and Gertrude.

Grady looked over Elk Horn’s injuries. “They didn’t leave much of his skin. Grady was furious. He never did understand such hatred and brutality. Grant handed him the box. He opened it and brought out a tin box. It was a salve he concocted from learning medicine from Gus and his Shoshone shaman friends. Carefully he rubbed the salve on Elk Horn’s slashed back. He was grateful Elk Horn was in a near coma sleep induced by a high fever. He needed to get water into Elk Horn before he died of dehydration. Elk Horn was also in shock and needed to be covered.

Ashley was going to go out of her mind. She didn’t understand anything Gus or Grady were saying. It was obvious the Indian understood them. They were speaking in a common language she didn’t understand. Ashley knew Grady would not be coming to her soon. She saw the injuries on the Indian. She was repulsed but wanted to desperately help.

Gus came into the cave for a blanket. “It’s safe, Ashley,” Gus said over his shoulder. “These two are Shoshone warriors we know. One of em was hurt bad.”

“I can tell,” Ashley responded. “I want to help. I can help take care of him.”

“He’s Indian,” Gus stated waiting for her reply.



“What difference if he’s Indian, Irish, Mormon, or a Bloody Brit? He’s a human being and I want to help,” Ashley insisted.

“He’s hurt purty bad,” Gus added. “It ain’t a purty sight for a lady’s eyes.”

“Or nose. I smell the blood. I saw the injury,” Ashley stated firmly. “What happened to him? It looks like he was whipped.”

“He was whipped. He was whipped so brutally it almost kilt him. It still may kill him. It’s bad.”

“I can help,” Ashley assured. “I went with Mamma to places she gave assistance for charity work. One place was a type of hospital slaves were sent after they were caught and punished. After they recovered they were taken back to their masters. It was horrible, but Mamma wanted me to see the horrors of slavery. I helped her salve their backs, give them water, and give them laudanum.”

“We kin use yer help,” Gus agreed. “Come with me.”

Grady watched Ashley come with Gus holding a petticoat in her hand. He was still applying salve to Elk Horn’s back. “Ashley, this isn’t pretty. Go back to the cave and get some rest.”

Ashley held her head high and jutted out her chin. “I have seen worse. You must have faith in me, Grady McGillinen.”

Elk Horn began thrashing in delirium.

Ashley started tearing her petticoat into strips. “Quickly begin to bandage his back. We need to get him covered with a blanket or he could get lung fever.” She handed the strips of petticoat to Grady.

Gus helped Grady bandage Elk Horn. Grant brought water from the spring. Ashley told Grant to soak a clean kerchief with water and bring it to her. Grant obeyed.

Gus worked with Grady and Grant to wrap Elk Horn in the blanket. He looked at Owl Feet out of the corner of his eye. Owl Feet was on his knees. It was obvious he was weak from exhaustion. “Owl Feet go with Grant and let him give you some food and water.” Then he spoke to Grant squatting next to him. “Give Owl Feet some food, water, and a bedroll. It looks as if he is about to drop.”

Ashley took the soaked kerchief and gently applied it to Elk Horn’s lips. He sucked on the cool water automatically. She knew he shouldn’t drink too much or he would vomit. Taking a piece left from her petticoat she soaked it in water and tenderly washed his forehead, face, and neck.



The group spent the night taking turns cooling Elk Horn's fever ravaged body through the night.

They couldn't give him any laudanum until he was conscious.

Gus was making a breakfast when Elk Horn finally gained consciousness.

Ashley had returned to the hot spring pool. She took clean clothes with her and changed before she returned to the campsite.

Grady remained by Elk Horn's side. Gus and Grant were sleeping in the cave with Owl Feet.

Elk Horn started chanting an old Shoshone prayer. The warriors were taught from childhood on to concentrate on prayers when battling pain.

Grady pulled the bottle of laudanum from the box. He held Elk Horn's head and poured a few drops into his mouth. It was a concentrated dose, but Grady believed Elk Horn needed it.

Elk Horn's chanting continued for a few moments. He fell into a blissful sleep.

"He's sleeping," Ashley commented as she took her place next to Grady's side. "He woke up then?"

"He woke up chanting. It helps them fight pain."

"He'll be needing more than songs," Ashley quipped. "I'll start making beef broth with some jerky."

"You should rest. Go up to the cave and get some sleep," Grady ordered. "I'll stay with Elk Horn."

"Grady."

"Yes sweetheart?"

"You speak their language," Ashley stated remembering the conversations between Gus, Grady, and the Indians when they appeared. "The Indians seemed to know you and Gus."

Grady looked lovingly at his wife. This would be a good opportunity to smooth the way. "We've known Owl Feet and Elk Horn for a few years. This is Shoshone territory. Gus and I have been in this country for about ten years. We've met a lot of Shoshone. They have shared their camp, food, and medicines. In that period of time we learned their language and they learned ours." There was even a time or two they saved our necks.

"Saved your necks?" Ashley gasped in fear. That meant Grady had been in serious danger.



“This can be rough country. I won’t lie to you, sweetheart. There are some people that don’t like Gus and I. I reckon I don’t like those some people either. Fact is we have a lot more friends than enemies. Those friends are working with us to make this a safer place to live.”

“The Indians are friends working together to make this a safer place?” All that she heard and read about the Indians wasn’t fact. Her experiences became more and more a revelation.

“Those are only some of the friends working together at the ranch. We have Chinese, Irish that left the famine,” Grady explained holding the last. He learned Ashley and her mother were against slavery, but he wasn’t certain how Ashley would take it finding runaway slaves working the ranch as cowpunchers, carpenters, farmers, and numerous other needed talents. “And former slaves.”

“Your ranch is going to prove very interesting,” Ashley said with anticipation. She was learning her husband had similar beliefs. This was going to be a wonderful and interesting marriage. “I’ll go to sleep after I start some beef broth for Elk Horn. He’ll need some food when he wakes. He looks better.”

“His fever is down,” Grady replied. “I’ll be up in the cave with you when the others wake to watch Elk Horn.”

Nothing needed to be said about staying at the campsite longer than a day. Elk Horn was in no shape to continue a journey. They wouldn’t leave until Elk Horn could be moved. She still couldn’t believe how any person could be so brutal to another human being.

It was near noon when Gus, Grant, and Owl Feet woke. Gus saw the beef broth heated over the fire on the tripod. He knew Ashley had made it for Elk Horn. She was fitting in quite well. She certainly wasn’t one of those hoity females from the East. He glanced at her sleeping in the cave. Ashley hadn’t complained once during the trip, not even the ambush set her running. He was hungry and wanted meat with the potatoes, turnips, and carrots. “Grant, what would ya think about going on a huntin trip with Owl Feet. I got a hankerin for rabbit.”

Grant stopped in his tracks. “Go with Owl Feet? Would he let me come? I don’t know his language.”

“Yer a fair to middlin hunter. Ya kin learn some Sosoni. Owl Feet speaks a little American, yer’d be fine.”



Owl Feet understood some of what Gus had told the man. He waited until Gus told him the complete conversation. He nodded, took his bow, arrow sheath, and knife. Grant nearly fell on himself taking the rifle and following Owl Feet. They would be hunting on foot.

They stayed at camp for three days. Elk Horn woke late in the evening. He was lucid enough to drink the broth. Elk Horn's fever broke and he ate solid food the second day. On the third day he attempted walking. It was painful to walk, but at least he was upright. They would put Elk Horn on one of the mares Grady brought with him.

The fourth day the troupe set out at dawn.

The conversation was light as they rode that day. Grant couldn't stop talking about his hunting expeditions with Owl Feet. He had learned a few words of Sosoni and how to hunt with a bow. He had often participated in archery, but hunting with accuracy was an art.

Elk Horn was uncomfortable but he was healing. He no longer wore the bandages. He only had a light salve on his back.

Max romped around the mules.



Chapter 10

Ashley did notice Justice's ears twitch. Justice also whinnied softly. She looked to watch Grady's horse and noticed the same behavior. "Grady," Ashley called with a bit of nervousness. She was about to ask him if there were strangers or other horses nearby when suddenly they were surrounded by Indians. Ashley reined in Justice and sat motionless. There were ten Indians. She counted them unconsciously. Ashley watched her husband. He was walking Spirit to the impressive one that looked like the leader. "Grady, no!" Ashley cried terrified for her husband.

"There is nothing to fear," Grady returned to his wife with a charming smile. "It's Cougar's Paw."

Ashley swallowed hard. How could he say there was nothing to fear so calmly? Who was Cougar's Paw?

Grady rode Spirit next to the Pinto horse of the impressive looking Indian. "Greetings," Grady said warmly. He extended his hand and Cougar's Paw accepted it taking his forearm firmly in his.

"I see you have found Owl Feet and Elk Horn for us," Cougar's Paw greeted. "When they did not return in two weeks time, we worried for them."

"With reason," Grady reported. "Elk Horn had a run in with some nasty settlers."

Cougar's Paw sighed heavily. "Elk Horn is too trusting. He always has been too trusting." The magnificent chief turned to toward Owl Feet. "You are too careful. That is why we sent the two of you together for the trade. You are unharmed?"

Owl Feet nodded.

"What are his injuries?" Cougar's Paw asked Grady.

"His back. He was whipped," Grady said simply.

Cougar's Paw slid from the back of his pony as graceful as an eagle in flight. He walked with regal stride to Elk Horn.



Ashley watched the face change from control to anger. It was just a flash, Cougar's Paw visage returned to control. Ashley found she was spell bound by the Indian. He wore only deerskin leggings, a breechcloth, and an ornate breastplate. There were decorated bands on his muscular forearms. On his feet were deerskin shoes that had also been intricately decorated. His black hair was loose but well combed and healthy looking. What impressed her the most was his regal bearing. He held himself like a European royal prince. She watched in silence as Cougar's Paw touched Elk Horn's forearm, spoke to him and walked toward Grady. He looked to the woods and whistled a melodic sound similar to a bird.

A beautiful woman emerged from the woods. She was riding a golden Palomino. Next to her a small boy appeared. He was riding a Pinto pony like Cougar's Paw. He rode the pony with the same regal bearing. Several other ponies appeared. Either women or children rode all of them. The beautiful Indian woman smiled at Grady and walked toward him and Cougar's Paw.

To Ashley's consternation Grady returned the Indian woman's smile and did not greet her in the same way he greeted Cougar's Paw. He hugged her and kissed her on not one, but both cheeks. To make matter's worse she hugged him back. The little boy by her side squeezed through them and her husband actually picked him up and hugged him. Grady checked his pockets and gave the little boy a small peppermint stick. Could she possibly have been his common law wife and the boy his son. Ashley felt her cheeks color with anger. She patted her growing belly and wanted to rail at the woman.

The Indian woman turned her attention to Ashley. She looked at Ashley sitting on the horse and turned to Grady. The Indian woman talked to Grady. After a few moments of conversation Ashley noted the Indian woman frown. Was she really Grady's common law wife? Was she finding out now a legal wife usurped her? How could she have been so wrong about Grady? The cad was smiling behind the frowning Indian woman. He was walking toward her with the Indian woman.

Ashley sat rigidly on Justice. She wasn't certain what she would say or do. She was angry, but terrified. She was disappointed. Her marriage to Grady up until now had been fairy tale perfect. She couldn't believe how happy she had been. The trip hadn't been a



hardship at all. Grady had seen to her comfort in every way. She was going to have his child. What was she going to do?

"Sweetheart," Grady addressed Ashley coming to stand by her. "I'd like to introduce Cougar Paw's wife and my very good friend, Morning Song."

"Cougar Paw's wife?" Ashley asked choking on the question in relief. Her head was so giddy at the moment, but he said a very good friend. Had they once been lovers? No, her imagination was running away with her reason and sensibility. "Morning Song?"

"I am pleased to meet you," Morning Song greeted. The frown had disappeared and a warm smile was exchanged for it. Morning Song turned to Grady with a scowl. "Your woman is with child. You make her travel a long journey. This is not good. Have you fed her properly? You have not let her toil?" Morning Song returned once again to Ashley. She hadn't waited for Grady to answer. "Come off that horse. I have salves that will give your legs comfort. We will make a camp and prepare your meal. We will also make certain this trip is slow and comfortable for you."

"I feel fine, really," Ashley protested. She was anxious to get to Grady's ranch now they were so close.

"No use to mix words with Morning Song. She'll have her way no matter what," Grady chuckled. "Cougar's Paw is the chief of the camp, but Morning Song rules the roost."

Ashley wasn't certain what Grady was trying to tell her. In Boston and the rest of the world as far as she knew the men controlled everything. "I don't understand."

Grady was laughing when he lifted Ashley from Justice and placed her on the ground. "In the Shoshone Nation the women have all the power. They are the life givers, just like you little Mama. Shoshone women own all the property. A warrior could find himself divorced and kicked right out of the house if he doesn't behave. Besides, have you noticed Shoshone warriors surround us? They won't argue with Morning Song. They will obey her. She's kind of like a queen here."

"Your husband has learned his lessons well," Morning Song chuckled. "He knows his correct place, luckily for him. Come with me. There is a hot spring near. I will massage you with my special medicines. I will take your care for my friend, Grady."



“You speak fluent English, Morning Song,” Ashley commented. It was a surprise to Ashley considering she had heard her husband and Gus talking with these Indians in some strange language.

“I was orphaned as a child. Some missionaries adopted me. I grew up outside the city of San Francisco. I went to the missionary school there,” Morning Song explained. “It was there I met Gus and Grady.”

“Purtiest little gel in Frisco,” Gus beamed. “She was jest about twelve when we met her.”

“It was fortunate for me,” Morning Song remembered. “Some less than human trappers were accosting me. Grady came along and convinced them of their error.”

“He knocked the pants off of em,” Gus added.

“Gus recognized me as Shoshone. He met the missionaries that had raised me. He learned they were tired of my cute novelty. They agreed it was time to return me to my people. I was terrified leaving the life I had known until Gus told me about my people. He told me about how loving they were as a family. Memories of a child overwhelmed me with anticipation. When we traveled to the Shoshone camp, a loving family immediately adopted me. I’ve never regretted my education with the missionary family, but I didn’t live until I was reunited with my people. Then I met Cougar’s Paw. We have a son, Eye of Hawk.”

Ashley was overwhelmed by Morning Song’s story. She couldn’t believe the missionary family had tired of her. *She was a novelty?* Ashley wanted to find that missionary and give them a good portion of a Christ like mind.

“Come with me,” Morning Song commanded pulling Ashley by the arm. They walked to the Palomino and retrieved a parfleche. They walked at a sedate pace to another hot spring pool in a secluded area of the mountains.

“You didn’t bring a weapon,” Ashley stated as she began removing her simple calico dress. She did enjoy the hot clean spring water.

Morning Song had already removed her deerskin dress, leggings, and moccasins. “There is no need. Surrounding us are our warriors. They would not let anything happen to us.”

Ashley covered her breasts. “Warriors? Surrounding us? Where?”



Morning Song laughed. "Ashley, do not worry so. They are near, but will not come too near. We need only scream and they will be here."

"I'll try not to scream," Ashley shuddered thinking of all those men possibly seeing her in the altogether.

"Sit on my dress," Morning Song ordered with authority.

Ashley sat down instantly. Truly Morning Song did have the authority of a queen.

Morning Song gently pushed Ashley down upon her dress. In her hand was small basket. In it was a fragrant salve. Morning Song used her fingers to bring some out and began massaging Ashley's legs.

It was a strange but exhilarating and wonderful feeling enjoying Morning Song's magic fingers. She turned obediently at Morning Song's command to turn onto her stomach. This time Morning Song started at her toes and ended at her back. Ashley was nearly asleep when Morning Song commanded her to go into the pool. Sitting in the hot water pool Ashley did admit she felt relaxed and invigorated. Her aching legs were no longer aching. "This is wonderful."

"I will take care of you," Morning Song promised. She was enjoying the hot bath as much as Ashley. "With my people, when a woman is with child, the husband brings sisters or cousins into the lodge to do the work. A woman with child does not work at all. She is given all comforts. Like the massage I gave you. She is given the best food. All the woman is expected to do is look beautiful and rest for the birth."

"That isn't the way it is for us," Ashley chuckled.

"I know," Morning Song agreed. "Unless you come from a wealthy family the woman works like one of your black slaves until the child is born. After a short rest, she again works. It makes me happy to be Shoshone."

"How long does this go on?"

"We are given rest until the child is four or five years old, like my Eye of Hawk," Morning Song responded with a smile. "Then it is time for Cougar's Paw and I to create another child."

"Your time births of your children?"

"Yes, we have medicines that help us do so. Tam Apo wants nature to be in balance. The settlers will cause imbalance when they multiply like rabbits. It is also known that carrying a child is draining



for the woman. She must have ample time to rest before conceiving another child.”

“That is so wise,” Ashley remarked. “We need some of that thinking in the political halls of Washington City.”

“How are you feeling? Has the medicine salve worked?”

“Most definitely. I feel comfortable and relaxed. I can’t ever remember feeling this good. I really like your medicine.”

“Good. Then we will do it again,” Morning Song promised.

“You will give Grady a fine healthy son.”

“We don’t know if it will be a son,” Ashley responded. “Grady told me he wants a daughter. He wants her to look like me.” Ashley blushed. That could be taken as a self-centered statement.

Morning Song frowned and shook her head. “Grady will have to wait. This is a man child.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“It is the heartbeat of a boy I see,” Morning Song answered.

Ashley looked at her naked body. She laughed, “Tell me where you see this?”

Morning Song smiled at Ashley’s doubt. She moved her forefinger to the small place on her throat above her collarbone. “There.”

“Truly?” Ashley said. “You must teach me this art.”

“I will teach you many things and you will teach me,” Morning Song replied. “We will have a long and close friendship.”

“Somehow I know this to be true,” Ashley stated knowingly.

“Come, let us dress. The other women of my camp must have finished our meal. Let us go and eat. I am hungry. You need to eat and feed your child,” Morning Song commanded. She rose from the water and walked to her clothes.

Ashley followed.

The two women had completed dressing and were walking toward the camp when a birdcall pierced the air.

Morning Song stood deathly still. She cocked her head as if listening for another sound. The call was repeated.

Ashley then noticed the flight of birds. It was a sign that their peace was being disturbed. She hurried her walk to camp.

Two horses appeared suddenly. The riders were on an old trail through the rocks.



“Well, looky what we got here, Bob,” Cal snickered. “We found us a squaw and a white woman. And here I was a thinking I had an itch needing to be scratched when I got to Carson.”

“Convenient ain’t it?” Bob laughed. “I always wanted a piece of red skin. You all right with the white one?”

“Looks like she’s a carrying, but that might make it more interesting,” Cal chuckled wickedly. “Where are your men folk ladies? I ain’t seen no wagon trail. Seems to me your men aren’t men if they allow you to wander alone and unattended.”

The two men dismounted. Their eyes were lecherous in anticipation.

“Come here little lady,” Cal grinned revealing a mouth of discolored teeth. “I’ll show you what a real man can do for you.”

Like magic Cougar’s Paw appeared behind the women. “Go.” He ordered filled with his natural authority.

“Looks like we got us a real brave,” Bob laughed reaching for the gun on his belt holster. “Think he’ll like a taste of lead?”

“Think it’s smart to shoot him?” Cal questioned. “He might have more around here.”

“Naw, there’s only one squaw,” Bob answered as if he were the smartest man in the West. “Can’t say I think to much of this white woman here consorting with Injuns.”

“Maybe she ain’t had a real man twixt her legs before,” Cal guffawed.

Cougar’s Paw repeated his command. “Go.”

Bob’s hand went to the pistol handle. To his amazement an arrow landed between his legs.

At the same time an arrow landed between Cal’s legs. “What the hell? More than one if you ask me.”

“More than one indeed,” Grady agreed appearing next to Cougar’s Paw.

Bob and Cal looked at each other and raised their hands in submission.

Gus and Grant appeared out of scrub brush. They were both pointing rifles at them.

“Bloody wise of you,” Grant commented cheerily. “Get on your horses now.”

“Them Injuns cain’t kill us,” Cal sneered walking backward slowly. Another arrow appeared between his legs.



“Yer right,” Gus chuckled. “These Injuns won’t kill ya, but I jest might take a notion ta. Them Injuns would help me hide yer bones so good even a coyote couldn’t sniff ya out. No listen to the nice Brit and git!”

Bob and Cal turned, ran to their horses, mounted, and took off in a gallop. They were cursing and swearing under their breath, but they left quickly with the skin on their backs in one piece.

Ashley ran to Grady. “My darling, why are men like this here? What makes these men so terrible?”

“Sweetheart, all the men out here aren’t like them,” Grady smiled picking up her chin and looking into those beautiful eyes. “There’s Gus and me, remember?”

“Gotta a mighty fine passel of men working on the ranch, too,” Gus added. “Some nice men and women in Ruth and Ely towns.”

Morning Song stood along side Cougar’s Paw embraced in his arms. “How many wildflowers do you find in the city, Ashley?”

The question puzzled Ashley but she answered, “Not many, a few here and there.”

“Look around you. There are wildflowers all over. This land is filled with them,” Morning Song said. “It is the open land. The wildflowers cannot grow into beautiful cultured city flowers. Here they can think their something. Do you understand?”

Ashley was confused for a moment as she mulled Morning Song’s words. The she understood. “Yes, everyone wants to be someone. Some people need that more than others. They want to be Lords of the manor. Here they think they can because there are no strict city rules and laws with people to enforce it.”

“Yes, and remember the wildflowers make this land what it is,” Morning Song stated. “It is not evil for them to exist, but this rough beauty draws others that will create the cultured city flower. These wildflowers will never disappear, but there will be less room for them.”

“The same is our fate,” Cougar’s Paw pronounced prophetically. “Some of people already know this. Bear Hunter and Washakie are already working on the needs of their people before we disappear.”

“And you are very wise, my husband,” Morning Song stated looking lovingly and with pride at her Cougar’s Paw.



Ashley was again astounded. "Cougar's Paw, you speak fluent English?"

Grady hugged Ashley tighter and spoke softly. His breath brushed her soft hair. "Cougar's Paw speaks better than some white people I know. Morning Song taught him. He doesn't like people to know he knows our language. It sort of gives him the edge in negotiations."

Ashley rested her head on Grady's chest. She still marveled at how fortunate she was to have married a wonderful brilliant man like him. "Morning Song is right, he is a wise husband, just like mine."

Grady took his finger and tipped Ashley's chin up to look in her eyes. "Ashley, I love you with all I am. I am so happy and proud you married me."

"I was thinking the same thing," Ashley responded.

Grady bent to cover Ashley's lips with his. The kiss was passionate. They clung together like moss on a tree for the longest time.

"Dag nabbit!" Gus grouched. "Let's eat. I'm hungry. If them two want ta eat each other, fine with me. I kin smell that fine cookin of the women right now."

Everyone retreated back into the rocks and moved toward the campsite leaving Grady and Ashley alone.

Grady finally looked up and commented, "I think we alone."

Ashley caught her breath. She looked around. "Yes, we are quite alone."

"I thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest when Owl's Feet told me there were men coming near the pool. He knew they were disreputable. I was so frightened for you and my child. No one knows what men like them will do. Were you terribly frightened?"

"No, I don't think I was. Morning Song had told me while we were in the pool that Cougar's Paw had sentinels surrounding us," Ashley replied truthfully. "I sensed Morning Song was not frightened at all. She maintained a calm regal serenity. I found comfort in that feeling."

"Cougar's Paw would be certain his wife was protected at all times," Grady acknowledged.



“Just as you do,” Ashley reminded. “I take comfort for that as well. I can’t help worrying about you and your safety out here in these wilds with these wild men.”

“I’ve lived out here for twelve years,” Grady reassured. “I’m still in one piece. Remember I’ve had the good fortune to be trained by the best woodsman west of the Mississippi, Gus. I also have had training in the ways of the Shoshone people by Cougar’s Paw.”

“I’ll try to remember that when you’re not by my side,” Ashley teased. “I, of course, prefer you to be my side.”

“You have drained the wanderlust from me, sweetheart,” Grady responded. “All I want to do now is stay on my ranch and watch you grow fat with my children.”

“I am getting fat,” Ashley sighed. “You may not like looking at me after awhile. My dresses barely fit any more.”

“Don’t you fret about that one bit,” Grady grinned. “You are the most beautiful woman in the world. That is all I see and all I care about. As for your dresses, we’ll make you new ones as soon as we get to the ranch.”

“Of course we will,” Ashley returned. At least she did learn how to sew properly. If there was a mercantile close she could buy needles, thread, and material. “Let’s eat. I find I am ravenous.”



Chapter 11

“Come,” Morning Song said taking Ashley’s arm and pulling her away from Grady. “The men have been served. We can eat.”

“You don’t eat with the men?”

“Of course not,” Morning Song laughed. “We women eat together to enjoy our conversation. We do not have to let our meals get cold while we jump up and down to serve the men their food.”

“Why can’t they serve themselves?” Ashley questioned.

“Grady, Gus, and Grant do.”

“These men are not typical men in your society are they? You grew up with servants, didn’t you?”

“Yes I did,” Ashley answered. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Servants eat later after you, didn’t they?”

“Yes. Are you saying with your people women are servants?”

“No of course not. The servants eat later so they can eat in peace and quiet. In the home I grew up in, Mrs. Hatter never had a hot meal and neither did I. We sat at the same table but were jumping up and down to give the men more potatoes, corn, meat, water, ale, or whatever. I hated it. The men talked consistently about their interests, politics, husbandry, and other things I never could participate in,” Morning Song related. “When I returned to my people I found I enjoyed the quiet conversation with women away from the men. Yes, they are served first, but that is because they hunted for our food. It was their reward.”

“But you prepare the hunted food,” Ashley commented.

“Yes, you are correct. Still I prefer the quiet and conversation of the women. Get rid of them first I say.”

“I think I understand,” Ashley said.

“Good, let us eat.”

The group traveled for three more days when they came upon a valley with small rivers and creeks cutting through the green lands like



veins in a body. Majestic mountains were on either side of the valley. The sky was clear and blue. The clean air smelled of fresh grasses.

Grady rode Spirit next to Justice. "We're almost home."

"Home," Ashley repeated. She would be happy to finally stay in one place longer than a night. She would finally have a roof over her head and a real bed to sleep in. What would Grady's ranch house be like? She hoped it wouldn't be a Soddy. Those houses were dark and airless. The roofs collapsed in after heavy rains or snows. There were insects everywhere. She hoped it was a small log cabin. She saw a log cabin ahead of her. It was small but that would be cozy. There were plenty of trees to build one. Morning Song had told her of the lodges of the Shoshone people. They were conical but similar to Gus's pavilion. She told her they were comfortable, clean, and warm in the winter, but Ashley didn't quite believe that. She didn't want to set up her house in Gus's pavilion. She would if she had too.

Grady was excited about showing Ashley his home. He was proud of it. He hadn't built it himself, but it was his. She would be surprised when she saw it. Grady left for the East about a year ago. When he left the second story of the ranch was completed. He and Gus stopped for a while in Chicago and ordered furniture, carpeting, and drapes. They would have been delivered by now. His housekeeper was capable. He was confident she would handle the deliveries. Mrs. Castle would put everything in its correct place. Ashley would make this a home. He hadn't thought about ordering a cradle in Chicago. Hell, he didn't know he would be a married man then. That was something he would tend to at the ranch. Surely Mr. Langely, a cabinetmaker, could create a magnificent cradle for his child.

"Is something wrong?" Ashley asked her husband. He had been silent for several moments as he rode along side of her. Silence during the ride was common, but his eyes were looking off to a faraway place."

"Sweetheart, everything is right. Everything is perfectly right."

"I saw a cabin down there near the creek. Is that ours?"

"Not yet, but if you want it I'll make it yours."

"How far are we from your ranch, Grady?" Ashley inquired.

"We'll be there tomorrow afternoon. Cougar's Paw will leave us then and ride west to his camp."

"Is his camp near our home?"



“Not far at all. Does that concern you?”

“Actually I’m happy. I think Morning Song and I will be good friends. I would like to know she won’t be too far away,” Ashley replied.

That answer sent warm feelings all through Grady. His wife was an exceptional woman. She left a wealthy comfortable home in a big city. She had little experience outside of that city, but she was fitting in here. She accepted new things, thoughts, and cultures. She hadn’t acted snobbish once. Ashley was his joy. Ashley was his destiny. “I’m glad to hear that. Cougar’s Paw and Morning Song are almost family to me. We visit with each other regularly.”

“Will we go to their camp?”

“Yep.”

“How will their people accept me? Ashley worried.

“The Shoshone will accept you as their family,” Grady promised. “You are a good woman, Ashley. You are an exceptionally good woman. The Shoshone people admire that.”

“The Shoshone don’t have bad people, like we do?” Ashley asked. She had been thinking about the two attacks on the trail. These were white people. She had heard it was savage Indians that were the danger in the West. It was disturbing to her. Perhaps there was an evil in white people alone.

“Yes, there are bad people in the Shoshone camp. Some are worse than others,” Grady replied honestly. “Some may even give you a difficult time. You can be certain that Cougar’s Paw is a wise chief and his power is supreme. His camp members wouldn’t dare say him. What he says goes. He keeps the camp in line.”

“Cougar’s Paw is quite powerful then,” Ashley commented.

“Yes he is. It’s like the power of a Senator in Washington City.”

“Not the President?”

“No. With the Shoshone there is a supreme chief, but he is getting old. Younger chiefs are trying to usurp his power. There are also hot heads that want a war with the white people settling,” Grady told her somberly.

“What you are saying is that there is a danger of an Indian War here,” Ashley deduced. “I heard such horrible stories about the Indian Wars with our ancestors.”



“They were fighting for their land and their way of life,” Grady stated with understanding. “They also became puppets of opposing European powers. That made the war bloodier.”

“Yes, I remember you telling me about that,” Ashley responded.

“This land is rich with beauty, game, soil, trees, and food. I can’t blame those Indians for fighting for it. I know I’ll fight for my land,” Grady mused. “The Shoshone and other people’s have a way of life that has many good points. There are drawbacks as well. We European settlers have a way of life that has many good points, but drawbacks. The key to success is to combine the good points and limit the drawbacks of both life styles. Cougar’s Paw and I are working on that. It is our hope. It is our future.”

“What are you working on?” Ashley questioned curiously.

“I’ve bought up as much land as I can. It is titled clear and registered with the Federal Government. Part of this land I’ve given to Cougar’s Paw and his camp. They live here. We’ve even built a few cabins there. One of them Cougar’s Paw, Morning Song, and Eye of Hawk live in,” Grady said with pride. It was first a thought, then an idea, and now a dream that he and Cougar’s Paw shared. Together they were working it out and making it happen. “Cougar’s Paw has his people learning about agriculture, husbandry, and trades. We learn about hunting, fishing, and tracking. It’s a fair trade. This land protects their camp from hostile white invasion because it is owned legally by a white man, me. My ranch is protected by their uncanny ability to read signs and communication system that would warn me of an unfriendly Indian attack. The Sioux are moving out here during Buffalo hunts. The Cheyenne are getting restless by constant skirmishes. The Paiute are waging war when they can. The Comanche from the South are just simply warriors for the hell of it. They live with their own code.”

“How is it working?” Ashley inquired. “I mean is it working out like you and Cougar’s Paw planned?”

“Better than we hoped,” Grady beamed. “There are some trouble makers, but the good outweighs the bad. Cougar’s Paw camp are taking right to the ways of the rancher and farmer.”

“My ranch hands are learning a lot from the camp. They are better with the horses, cattle, and hunting.”



“And the lion shall sleep with the lamb,” Ashley quoted. Her husband was amazing. He was making a small cut of a haven in a large, wild, and dangerous place.

“Not quite like that. We still have a lot of hungry lions that like lamb meat,” Grady joked.

Ashley punched him on the shoulder. “Do you have sheep?”

“I’m Irish! Of course I have sheep. We use their wool to make warm cloth and blankets. The Shoshone women are being taught to card the wool, weave and dye it by a few wives of my ranch hands,” Grady related. “The women on my ranch are learning new and delicious ways to cook natural foods found in abundance here. They are learning how to cure and make soft buckskins for their clothing.”

“You have families on your ranch?” Ashley inquired. “Wouldn’t they want to settle their own land?”

“I don’t have slaves, sweetheart. The hands can leave anytime they want. Some did try their hand at ranching or farming. It didn’t work for them. Some are older and tired. They just want a secure home and income. Many of the women make their men quit digging for gold to provide a secure home and income. You can’t argue with a good wife.”

“You better remember that,” Ashley teased. “I may need that statement in the future.”

“The only time I’ll ever argue with you is if your life is in danger,” Grady promised. He was called by Gus then and rode off.

It was the afternoon of the next day and Ashley still hadn’t seen the ranch. She did see a man on a horse watching over a herd of cattle. It was a large herd to her. She counted almost fifty head. A little further she saw horses of all kind and color in a rough corral.

“We’re home,” Grady shouted as he rode ahead to a large cluster of pine trees.

It was when Ashley passed the cluster of trees that she saw the ranch house. The view was incredible. She saw a log house that was two stories high. It was bigger than her father’s mansion. The log home had heavy drapes covering some windows and others had white lace curtains. There were four chimneys. Two of the chimneys had smoke coming from them. There was another log home attached to the main log home with a protected walkway. Ashley guessed that would be the kitchen because of the iron stove pipe extending above



the roof. There were small log cabins surrounding the home in the back and two large barns and a stable off to the right side. Children of every color were playing in front of the log mansion. She watched as they all ran to greet Grady as if he were a father coming home after a long trip. There were two women beating a carpet on ropes strung from tree to tree. They stopped their work and waved to her husband. She saw clean wash hanging on rope lines strung from cabin to cabin and tree-to-tree in the back. It was a little village.

Gus rode next to her. "What ya thinkin little gel?"

"Children. I didn't expect women and children. There are so many of them," Ashley said in wonder. "There are Negroes, Indians, Chinese, White, and Mixed blood children all playing here together."

"Amazin ain't it?" Gus grinned.

"You certainly wouldn't see this in Boston," Ashley chuckled. "Where are their parents?"

"The ones that were orphaned have been taken in by a few families here. The rest belong to workers or they come from nearby settlers. We got an educated woman here that holds school in that cabin over there."

"Your ranch has a school house?" Ashley gasped.

"Taint a formal one so to speak, but Grady and I see ta it that the kids have chalkboards, chalk, books, paper, and the like," Gus divulged proudly. "We plan on building a real school house in the future betwixt here and Ely."

"Gus, I am speechless."

"Ya never expected this did ya?" Gus hooted with glee.

"I expected a one or two room cabin," Ashley admitted. "Gus, those horses and cattle?"

"Their ours alright," Gus boasted. He pointed to the mountains behind. "Our land starts there at the top of the mountains." He made a large circle with his arms. "And all around fer as far as ya can see. It's ours. We got lots of grazing and growing land. It's a good place this ranch."

The conversation ended when they were in the middle of the children gathered around Grady. In his arms he held a little blonde girl about four years old.

Ashley was mesmerized watching her husband with the children. It was obvious they adored him. The little girl leaned over to plant a kiss on his cheek. She watched as Grady beamed with



happiness and returned the little girl's kiss with his kiss on her cheek. He was talking with the little girl when he began tickling her. She giggled in delight. Ashley watched as he put the little girl on the ground with a gentleness that would indicate the little girl was made of the finest porcelain. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a brown bag filled with peppermint sticks. The children surrounded him like hungry ducks in a pond being thrown breadcrumbs. He kneeled down to their level and gave them each a candy stick. The little girl was the first to receive a candy. She danced merrily away with her golden curls bouncing. Ashley dismounted with Gus's assistance. When the children spotted Gus they started swarming him allowing Grady to walk to Ashley. Gus pulled out a bag of licorice and offered that to the children. Ashley was surrounded by children between the ages of ten and three. Older children were peering out of the schoolhouse. Gus called them out and offered them licorice.

"What do you think of the ranch and its tiny inhabitants?" Grady asked Ashley taking her in his arms.

"I think you need a good thrashing," Ashley said gruffly but unable to hide her happiness and relief. She wouldn't be living in a Soddy after all. This place wasn't isolated from civilization at all. It was civilization at her doorstep. This was an English manor and she was the Mistress of the Manor. She could hit Grady for keeping this from her, but she wanted to kiss him for giving it to her. "How did you do all this?"

"I didn't do it. These families did it. These families made this ranch what it is," Grady said with humility. "It is true Gus and I provided the money to begin, but these families made it."

The little girl with the flaxen hair returned being held by an attractive woman dressed in a simple calico. "Welcome back, Grady. Little Julia missed you. You spoil her and the children."

"I missed Julia," Grady replied. "How are you doing Louisa?"

"I'm doing well," Louisa returned with a smile.

Julia pulled from her mother's arms and reached for Grady.

Did Ashley see a longing in Louisa's eyes?

"How is Jake?" Grady asked taking Julia in his arms once more.

"He's off again. Jake is looking over some land near Ruth he's thinking of buying to farm."



“He’s working hard to make a good place for you and Julia,” Grady offered.

Ashley felt suddenly awkward when Julia started staring at her boldly.

Julia raised her finger and blurted, “Uncle Grady, who is that woman?”

“That woman, Julia, is my wife. May I introduce you?” Grady answered. “Ashley, meet Miss Julia Deptford. Miss Deptford, meet Mrs. McGillinen.”

Ashley heard Louisa gasp and her posture stiffen. She saw her color fade and then watched as pink colored her cheeks.

“You’ve married?” Louisa squeaked out unsteadily. “I thought she was the schoolmarm you’ve been talking about getting.”

Ashley sensed there was something more in Louisa’s heart than a friendship with her husband. “I’m sorry to disappoint you. Grady and I were married in Boston. We’re expecting our first child in a few months.”

Louisa looked Ashley over and realized Grady’s new wife was expecting. “I’m sure Grady is delighted.”

“Delighted? I’m beside myself with joy. I’m hoping for a pretty little girl like Julia. Wouldn’t you like a new playmate, Julia?”

“More boys around here than girls,” Julia remarked. “It would be nice to have another little girl around here. Don’t need no more boys. I got me a boy brother already. He’s a pain in the patoot!”

“Julia! It’s I have a brother, and you mustn’t ever say bad words!” Louisa reprimanded taking Julia from Grady’s arm. “You get in that cabin right now. Jaygee is probably waking from his nap.”

“Jaygee?” Grady questioned furrowing his brow. “I didn’t know you were with child when I left. When was the little fellow born?”

“Jaygee was born two months ago,” Louisa answered looking at Ashley. “I named him Jacob Grady. We call him JG or Jaygee for short.”

“That is a real surprise. You gave him my name. I am honored.” Grady commented. “I can see why Jake is looking to start his own farm. His family is growing.”

“You are the finest man I know. There was no question I would name a son after you. I have to get back to the cabin,” Louisa excused. She walked briskly away.



It was not lost on Ashley that Louisa Deptford had ignored her. "Go on back to the school house kids," Grady ordered. He took Ashley's hand and led her to the ranch house. At the steps he picked her up as easily as if she were a bag of horse feed and carried her into the house. "I've been wanting to show this to you for a long time."

Ashley was breathless. The entrance room was large with two ornately carved cherry wood staircases going to a second floor. The walls were plaster with a pale blue paint coloring. There was a large mirror on the first floor hanging on the wall between the two staircases. A desk with a chair on each side was under the mirror. A candle Chandelier hung from the ceiling in the center of the room. On the walls going up to the second floor were kerosene brass lamps. The windows had heavy dark blue draperies with white lace panels. They were pulled apart to allow sunlight in by golden tasseled cords.

Grady put her down carefully. "It needs a lot of work yet. It needs a woman's touch. Right now it's a ranch house. I want you to make it our home."

Ashley was deeply touched by Grady's words. He was giving her this palace in the wild and asking her to make it their home. "I'll do my very best. I promise you that my darling."

A gray haired older woman appeared from a door on the right wall. "Grady, you're finally home!"

"Mrs. Castle, I'd like to introduce the mistress of the house. Mrs. Ashley McGillinen."

The woman's mouth dropped. It wasn't from shock. Ashley could see it was joy.

"Saints be praised. Glory be!" Grace exclaimed joyfully. "At last you have taken a wife. This ranch needs a family in it. And if you aren't the loveliest angel to be found in these parts." Grace took Ashley's hands. She kissed her knuckles. "A fine wife indeed for the mangy cur." She looked at Grady. "Where did you find so fine a lady?"

"Boston, but I'd have crossed the oceans to find this lady if I needed to," Grady answered.

"The boy got thunderstruck," Gus commented entering the room.



“Tis easy to see why,” Grace said pulling Ashley to her for a hug. Once in her arms Grace felt the growing abdomen. “Grady, she’s with child!”

“I am aware of that,” Grady teased.

“Well she shouldn’t be standing here so tired after riding such a long way. You savage. You’ve been out here too long. A fine lady should’ve had a carriage. Especially since she’s in the family way,” Grace chided. “Come along child. Come to the parlor. I’ll make you a hot cup of tea. Would you like scones?”

Ashley was literally pulled into a large room with wainscoting and wallpaper. Tea? Scones? Audrey and Alyson would never believe this. The room had fine parlor furniture made from cherry wood and intricately carved. The cushions were the best brocade with beige and red striping. No, Audrey and Alyson would never believe this. There was a large fireplace in the center of the outer wall. She was pulled to the divan.

“Sit down, my dear,” Grace ordered. “I’ll get us some scones and tea.”

Ashley watched her leave the room presumably for the attached kitchen. She looked around and couldn’t believe her eyes. No one sitting here would realize it wasn’t the parlor of a Boston mansion if they hadn’t walked in the front door. Ashley noticed paintings on the walls that equaled the master’s talents. The subjects were different. These were oil paintings of Indian camps and landscapes of the area. The paintings were hung on the walls in gilded frames. Ashley did feel overwhelmed. She was the mistress of the manor. That is what Grady had said. She closed her eyes for a moment. Suddenly she did feel tired.



Chapter 12

“There you are,” Grace stated carrying a silver tray that held a fine English China teapot, cups, saucers, and a plate of scones.

Ashley woke with a start at her words. She had fallen asleep sitting up on the divan. She wondered where Grady was, but the tea and scones smelled wonderful. She was hungry.

Grace placed the expensive set on a polished cherry wood table located in front of the divan. “Sugar? Cream?”

“Both please,” Ashley requested taking one of the warm scones. She put the scone into her mouth and sighed. It was perfectly and sinfully delicious. “Grace, this scone is wonderful. Where did you learn to make this?”

“I was a cook for a fine Lord in England, when Martin decided he wanted to brave this new world. We left for America and while he sought his fortune, I worked as cook for a fine family in Maryland,” Grace related. “Martin saved his wages and soon we were on our way to a place called Illinois. Martin didn’t suit well to farming. His way was more with animals. He had always served in the stables and livery for our lords. We went further west. He had hoped to start a fine stable out here. It didn’t work out. His heart stopped while building a corral for the horses he bought. I had no choice but to sell the land, horses, house, and corrals Martin had built. Martin loved this valley.” Grace swallowed. It was emotional for her. “That’s when I met the fine Mr. McGillinen. The land was close to land he bought. It already had horses and a corral, he offered me for it. It was a good offer. He paid me more than it was worth. Then the blessed lad asked me where I would be going. I told him I didn’t know. I didn’t want to leave Martin behind. Our children were grown and living in the East, but I didn’t want to go back to the dirty city. I didn’t want to return to England either. Grady offered me this position. I tell you, it has been a wonder seeing this place grow. And I didn’t have to leave Martin.



He's buried just north of here. His grave is high on a hill overlooking the land he bought. He can see his corral and the stable Grady built."

"I did see a corral of horses when we rode in," Ashley said quietly. "Where those Martin's horses? They were beautiful animals."

"Those were Martin's horses," Grace smiled. "Martin had a good eye for fine horseflesh."

"I didn't see a stable," Ashley remembered.

"Grady built the stable under a copse of large oak trees. It shields the stable from winter winds and from the heat of the summer. That Grady has a good eye and common sense for building things. He also listens to the Shoshone that live here. We all can learn a thing or two from them. They've lived here a lot longer than we have," Grace stated with wisdom.

"My husband also set this ranch in a copse of trees," Ashley noticed. "Did he build the ranch here for the same reason?"

Grace nodded. "We all love Grady. There isn't one of us that couldn't tell you a story about him. He's a saint he is. Tell me about you."

"There isn't much to tell," Ashley blushed. She certainly hadn't done anything spectacular like carve a paradise out of a wilderness. She worked a few charities with her mother, but nothing like Grady seemed to accomplish. "I am the daughter of Harold Stuart. I have two other sisters, Audrey the elder, and Alyson. We lived in Boston."

"Harold Stuart?" Grace laughed. "The Duke that ran away to marry a colonist?"

"Yes," Ashley responded. "You know of my Papa?"

"I was just a child, but it was the talk of the ton. My mother was cook to Harold Stuart's sister in Devonshire. It caused quite a scandal it did. Lady Wetherford took it hard. She was widowed and childless. Everyone had counted on Harold to hold the family estates together and marry into titled blood."

"Papa still manages the estates," Ashley informed. "He's quite good at it. Over the years he manages to visit occasionally. We have accompanied him. I've always enjoyed the sea voyage and the English countryside. I've visited Lady Wetherford. She's content with her stipend from Papa."



"Your Papa always was a generous kind man," Grace agreed. "We servants always knew these things. Gossip from one manor to another you know."

"He is a kind man," Ashley hesitated. The implication of the rift she had created with her elopement impaled her heart.

Grace noticed the melancholy instantly. "I take it your Papa didn't agree to this marriage?"

Ashley was astounded by the wisdom of people Grady surrounded himself with. Ashley realized the people she knew in Boston were quite superficial. A tear trickled down Ashley's cheek. "I know it was wrong. Papa has a right to be angry with me. I met Grady and I knew I loved him. I knew it was right. I couldn't be Papa's little girl any more. I couldn't marry for title or bloodline. I just couldn't."

"Harold Stuart was also stubborn," Grace scoffed. "Here it is, he left his dukedom to marry a colonist and doesn't understand his own child's love. The man should be horsewhipped. It's not your fault, darling child. Tis your Papa's stubbornness. I should also guess that he really didn't want to let you go."

"He wanted me to marry Lord Grant Wessex," Ashley sniffed. "I would have to live in England."

"Didn't you say he travels to England," Grace reminded. "He could still visit you there. He could see his daughter as a fine Duchess."

"He could visit here," Ashley countered.

"I simply can't see the fine Lord Stuart of the Royal Stuart Bloodline riding a horse through dusty fields across the wilderness," Grace laughed.

"In denims and flannel," Ashley added laughing.

"What's this?" Grant questioned entering the parlor. He saw the two women with tears on their cheeks and smiles upon their lips. He knew that was a dangerous combination for a man to question. "Never mind. I could have sworn I smelled scones in here."

"Would you care for a cup of tea and scone?" Grace invited graciously.

"Madam, I would care very much," Grant quipped.

Grace noticed the heavy English accent on a man dressed in range working clothes. She thought it quite odd. As she poured the



tea she asked, "If I might be so bold, what are the likes of an English Aristocrat doing here and wearing range clothes?"

"I've come for adventure," Grant responded to the older woman while savoring his scone. "And I've found it. I say, these scones are the best I've had since I was a lad in England."

"Thank you," Grace accepted.

"Grace, this is Lord Grant Wessex," Ashley introduced.

Grace nearly dropped her teacup. "The Lord Wessex your father wanted you to marry?"

"The same. You told her already?" Grant addressed looking at Ashley.

"It came up in the conversation regarding my marriage," Ashley defended blushing slightly.

"Yes, I suppose it would," Grant accepted.

Grace would not be put off. "You came with Grady? You came together? Here?"

Grant replied innocently, "Of course."

"Is Grady addled?" Grace asked Ashley.

"Of course he isn't," Ashley replied surprised with Grace's question.

"I'm not certain of that if he allows a suitor to follow you to his home," Grace complained. "You watch your manners, Lord Wessex. Grady is the finest man that ever took a breath. If you muddle with his love, I'll...I'll... I'll shoot you!"

"Madam, Ashley and I never did love each other. By good fortune I met her allowing me to meet Grady and Gus," Grant explained calmly. "We have become chums."

"See that it stays that way," Grace demanded.

"My oath," Grant chuckled. "By the by, would you be interested in returning to England with me? I am need of an excellent cook in my London town home."

"No!" Grace answered firmly.

Ashley giggled, "Grace has aversions to large dirty cities."

"Then my country estate?"

"No!" Ashley and Grace declared in unison.

"Can't blame a man for trying," Grant laughed with a wink.

"Tis a rogue we have here," Grace joked. "Tis a good thing this rogue fails to win his ladies fair."



“Oh I am wounded,” Grant returned in jest. “How cruel is a love’s tongue. How it pierces the heart.”

Grace and Ashley laughed at Grant’s dramatics.

“Grant, where is Grady?” Ashley asked finishing her tea.

Grant was already eating his second scone. “He told me he and Gus were going to the study. Apparently there is a stack of bills, invoices, and letters that need tending too. Bloody glad I’m on holiday. Those were tasks I disliked the most.”

Grace rose from the chair. “I should get them some coffee and food.”

“I’ll help you,” Ashley said attempting to rise from the divan. Her legs would not cooperate. She sank down again.

“Don’t you fret child,” Grace soothed. “I can see you are exhausted. I’ll take you up to the master bedroom before you collapse. You take a nap and then I’ll tend to a nice soapy hot bath.”

“I would really like that,” Ashley confessed. “I find I am getting more and more easily fatigued.

“Tis the babe growing in you,” Grace comforted. “The little one takes all your energy as it grows. You will find you need to rest more often.” Grace assisted Ashley from the divan and began walking her toward the right side of the staircase. She turned to Grant in the parlor and spoke to him over her shoulder. “If you have a mind too, you can finish the scones.”

Grant nodded happily. He was eating his third scone. There was only one left. He sipped his tea. He was thinking this tea and scones actually tasted better than ones made in England.

Grace walked with Ashley to the first room on the right side. It had double doors that were painted white to match the painted plaster. A long woven rug of triangular patterns ran down the long hall. There were three more sets of doors. Two doors were on the opposite side and one more on the master side. The master door opened to reveal a room of deep green. The bed was gigantic. It required steps to lie upon it. It was a canopy bed. The canopy was deep green velvet matching the coverlet. The pillows and linen were white. Ashley recognized them as expensive Irish Linens. There was a window in the room located at a high point on the wall. It had dark green draperies dropping to the floor held back by matching green sashes. The room boasted a large fireplace that matched the location of the parlor fireplace below. There were four intricately carved cherry



wood armoires. On the left side of the room another door opened to a large dressing area. A door on the far wall opened to a private bathing area with commode. Ashley glanced to see white fluffy towels neatly piled on a chest. The floor was white and green tile.

"I know, it is green," Grace laughed helping Ashley out of her simple calico dress. "Grady loves green. He says it reminds him of his Emerald Isles."

"It is spectacular," Ashley remarked. "This is three times the size of my own room back home. I certainly did not have a private bathing room with commode."

"It is grand," Grace agreed. "He keeps making things better so he can offer good people wages. He's a good man, your husband." Grace continued to unbutton the calico. "Goodness, child. This dress is far too tight."

"I wasn't carrying a child when we left Boston," Ashley sighed. "Unfortunately the few clothes I brought with me are tighter than this."

"We'll have to start making you some maternity dresses as soon as possible. This dress won't last very long and it isn't healthy to cramp you and child up like that," Grace warned. "I'll start on it tomorrow. I've made several mother dresses in my day. Don't you fret. You just rest. I'll wake you in plenty of time to bathe before dinner."

Ashley climbed into bed. The sheets were soft, clean, and smelled of fresh air and sunshine. There were three mattresses. Each was made of soft down. Grace had given her one of her clean soft nightgowns. It was way to large but it was clean and comfortable. It was also feminine with smocking, ribbons, lace, and buttons. Ashley fell asleep as soon as her head hit the feather pillows.

Shortly after taking care of Ashley, the efficient Grace prepared a light meal of fried chicken and biscuit. She prepared coffee for Gus and lemonade for Grady. She carried the tray into the study where Grant and Gus had opened all the mail, separated the bills from the invoices, and had finished discussing all of them. Grant was calculating debits and credits in his ledger. Gus was reading the mail. "I brought you some food."

"Grace ya are an angel of mercy," Gus praised reaching for his hot coffee and a chicken breast.



"Mind your manners," Grace scolded handing a crockery plate to Gus. Next she handed him a linen napkin. She served Grady his chicken leg on a plate adding two biscuits and a slab of honey butter. Grace placed the napkin by the plate with the necessary flatware and put his glass of lemonade next to the plate.

"Thank you, Grace," Grady appreciated still concentrating on his sums in the ledger.

"Humph, don't cater to me like that," Gus grumbled.

"I don't because you are a cantankerous old goat," Grace teased. "And you complain too much."

Grady looked up from his sums. "You do grouch a lot."

Gus raised his brow and tossed Grady an innocent look.

Grady laughed and took a sip of lemonade. "That is delicious, Grace. Where is Mrs. McGillinen?"

"The poor lady is plumb worn out. She fell asleep as soon as she was in bed," Grace answered. She thought it a good time to approach the subject of buying cloth and sewing dresses for Ashley. She would need permission to travel to Ely tomorrow and buy material and notions while he was at his books. "Grady, the little lamb doesn't have a decent dress to wear. That calico is worn thin and far too tight with the babe growing. She told me her other clothes are tighter."

"I didn't notice," Grady sighed guiltily.

"You wouldn't notice," Grace excused. "It isn't healthy for a carrying woman to be confined so tight."

"Grace, what do you want me to do?" Grady asked knowing full well Grace had everything in control and planned already.

"I'd like to ride into Ely tomorrow to buy fabric and notions to make Mrs. McGillinen some fine comfortable clothes," Grace requested.

"Take Louisa Deptford with you, and several men. You know I don't like women riding into Ely unescorted," Grady suggested. "I want Louisa to buy that porcelain doll Julia admired last time I took her into town."

Grace's mood changed. "You're very good to that little girl, too good."

"She's as cute as a little button. I hope Ashley and I have a little girl as pretty as Julia."

"Louisa could misinterpret your kindness," Grace warned gently.



Gus picked up on the warning. Grady did not.

"She's a cute one and I like the children to be happy. Louisa told me how much she talked about that doll since she saw it."

Grace remained silent for a moment. How much could she say to Grady? "Maybe she thought if she told you about it, you would be certain to buy it for Julia."

"Even if she did, I still would like to buy the girl the doll, Grace," Grady ordered.

"Certainly," Grace agreed reluctantly.

"Here is a money draft. I've signed it and you can put the amount of the purchases payable to Rutledge Mercantile," Grady said giving Grace the draft. "While you are there I'd like you to check on baby clothes and the like. Let me know what type of assortment Rutledge has in the mercantile. I want you to buy anything you think Ashley could need or want."

"I'll do that," Grace accepted. "I'd better start dinner." She left the study.

"I wonder what that snit is all about," Gus mused.

Grady was already back at his sums, "What snit?"

"Dag nabbit, Grady," Gus grouched. "Sometimes ya are as dumb as a stump."

"Gus, I have no idea what you are talking about," Grady responded. "The good news is we have doubled our profits from last year."

"Good news alright. Yer gonna need the money to pay fer the new young'uns."

Grady sat against the back of his chair. The leather protested as he leaned back. "This is almost unreal. I'm going to be a Pa. I do want a little girl just like Ashley."

"Morning Song told me it's a boy," Gus countered.

"That's fine also as long as the child is healthy has two legs, two arms, one head, five fingers, and five toes," Grady responded. "I think I'll call her Kerry after my mother. I like that name, Kerry."

"What will you call the boy," Gus insisted.

"I don't know yet. I haven't thought about it. If I will a girl, I'll have a girl. I want to spoil her like I'm going to spoil her Mama. I'm lucky, Gus. I'm really lucky."



"Ya sure were born with the luck of the Irish, Mick!" Gus teased. "Take good care of her, Grady. Don't let anything come between you and her, especially now."

Grady looked at Gus, "What brought that on?"

"Oh nothing, Mr. Stumpy."

It was dusk when Grace woke Ashley from her rest. Grace had ranch hands bring in buckets of hot water quietly into the bathing room from the kitchen. She had filled the bath with fragrant bath salts she had made from juniper. She also had several bars of her homemade juniper soap. Grace had quietly unpacked the few belongings Ashley had brought with her and found a warm blue woolen wraparound robe. Grace also found a fancy silken nightgown. She laid out both in the bathing room.

Ashley was so exhausted she let Grace handle everything including helping her undress and go into the tub.

The bath salts were as soothing as Morning Song's rub. The bath was wickedly delicious. Ashley let Grace wash her hair. When the bath was completed Grace sat Ashley in a chair, dried her body, helped dress her and combed her hair into a long plait.

"I'm still so tired, Grace," Ashley admitted. "Do you think something is wrong with me, or my baby?"

"You've slept on hard ground for months. You've been riding strenuously for just as long. You've been alert and tense throughout this journey. Now your body has a permanent roof and a comfortable bed," Grace explained. "You are unwinding."

"It doesn't seem to have bothered Gus or Grady."

"Those leathered men are used to it. They ride for days and days all the time. They're always camping out on the hard ground," Grace elucidated. "They haven't been raised genteel and they sure don't have a baby growing in them. Hush, everything is just fine."

"Grace, I will need new clothes. Is there a mercantile near? I need to purchase some yard goods and notions."

"I'm going into town tomorrow. I'll pick out some things for you," Grace informed tying a ribbon to the end of Ashley's hair.

"I'll come along," Ashley yawned.

"The last thing you need is another trip on a horse or wagon," Grace chided. "You will stay here and rest."



"I suppose you are right," Ashley agreed readily. She was too tired to make another trip on a horse or a wagon. "I'll stay here and rest. I do need time to learn the house and how it is run."

"You just rest. I run this house and I'll tell you everything when we work on your clothes. You shouldn't have a worry in your head for some time," Grace stated firmly. "I'll have Dora May come into tomorrow to cook the meals and see to the housework. She'll show you around the house and take care of you."

"Grace, whatever you say," Ashley conceded. "I am confident of your ability to handle everyone including me."

"Good, you stay in bed and I'll send your supper up to your room."

"But Grady will expect me."

"I'll take his tray into the study," Grace replied. "Gus and Grady have a lot to do. They'll be busy until late."



Chapter 13

"Thank you," Grady acknowledged when Grace and Dora May brought in large trays. "Did Ashley eat?"

"The darling ate well," Grace assured. "Poor Lamb is exhausted. After her bath and dinner she went to sleep."

"She is alright?" Grady asked in concern.

Grace placed the tray in front of Grady and removed the large napkin to reveal a large steak, mashed potatoes, carrots, and slice of apple pie. A cup of steaming coffee was on the side. "She's fine. The poor lamb is just worn out. This journey was harder on her than everyone thought. Ashley is delicate and this trip carrying a baby just wore her out. She needs rest, lots of rest."

"What are you telling me?" Grady asked cocking a brow.

"I put her in your bed, but she's sleeping soundly," Grace answered. "I think it best if she's not disturbed."

"I'll sleep in the west guest bedroom," Grady said starting to cut the steak. "Will that do?" In Grady's mind it would be just for one night.

"That will do just fine."

Grace was up before dawn. She and Dora May worked in the large cool kitchen making breakfast

"Remember what I say, Dora May," Grace reminded before she left.

"Not a word," Dora May replied. "No one pays much attention to Louisa anyway. She's snooty."

"Louisa fancied Grady since she got here," Grace said in disgust. "She's used that little girl to keep close to him. I don't understand. Jacob is a fine man. He adores her and his children."

"She's one of them women that need money and power like some need opium," Dora May offered. "I saw it a lot at the plantations. Those young belles looking doe eyed at the rich swains. All they thought about was about them fancy houses, gewgaws, and the best gowns."



“What to do about it?” Grace complained. “Those little insinuations of hers plant seed. Mrs. McGillinen is bound to hear them.”

“We know all that is just in Louisa’s head,” Dora May stated. “Mrs. McGillinen is smart. She’ll catch on.”

“I hope you’re right. It’s about time Grady married and started a family,” Grace said mixing the batter for flapjacks. “He’s happy, nothing should bother that.”

“What Mrs. Deptford is doing would bound to hurt him soon enough. He needs to realize what she is doing and put a stop to it,” Dora May grumbled. “I don’t think he’d let anything hurt his new bride. He does seem to love her a lot.”

“It’s true he just can’t see how Louisa uses Julia. She makes him look like they do have a thing going on because he takes a shine to her daughter,” Grace agreed. “I think Mrs. McGillinen saw it right off.”

“Mrs. McGillinen is a sweet pretty thing. She also had sense enough to catch the elusive Mr. McGillinen. She didn’t let him get away,” Dora May related her thought. “She must have a lot of sense under all that pretty.”

“I can tell she does,” Grace concurred. “She also is kind and amiable. If something shocks or surprises her, she doesn’t let on at all.”

“Don’t you fret a bit,” Dora May soothed. “I’ll take Mrs. McGillinen in hand all day while you are gone. You manage Mrs. Deptford and her children while you’re in Ely. Those folk don’t know Mr. McGillinen like we do. She might damage him in town.”

“I’m taking her to Rutledge Mercantile. Then we’re going to have lunch at Ely Restaurant. After that we are coming straight home,” Grace informed. “I shall confine any and all conversation to work at the ranch.”

“Humph, your work at the ranch,” Dora May responded. “Miss Hi and Mighty does as little work as possible. The most I have seen her do is pin laundry on the lines. Most of it is her laundry. Even then it is only once a week. Lord knows we do laundry in this little village every day with so many workers, hands, and the like.”

“She did just have a baby,” Grace reminded.



"I guess that's as good excuse as any for now," Dora May groused. "But she didn't do much more when she and Jake Deptford came here for employment."

"Jake has done more than his share," Grace defended.

"He is a hard working man for certain," Dora May agreed. "Let's get this breakfast done and over. I want all these dishes cleared before I check on Mrs. McGillinen."

Ashley woke to sunbeams lighting her room. She reached over for Grady and realized he wasn't there. His part of the bed hadn't been slept in. A melancholy slipped over her. They shared a bed, a bedroll, or even hard ground every night since their marriage. It couldn't be that he had too much work to take care of? Why didn't he come to their bed? Was he tired of her already? Would her misshapen carrying body fill him with revulsion? Or was it because the beautiful Mrs. Deptford and daughter were nearby? She remembered how that Louisa looked at her husband with doe eyes. She and Grady shared many lustful pleasant nights. Would she have to share him with another woman? Was that where he was? Was Grady in her bed?

No! She wouldn't share Grady. She would fight for Grady! In the east some married women accepted their husbands' mistresses. She would not!

Ashley pulled off her covers. She tried to get out of the bed but found her legs were tangled in the voluminous nightdress she borrowed from Grace Castle. Struggling with the dress she was able to free her legs and find the bed steps. Ashley found her wrapper neatly folded on the chair next to the armoire. She put it on and belted it tightly. After her full day of rest she was refreshed. Ashley was very refreshed and fighting mad. She would find Grady. If he were in the arms of another there would be a fight for certain. Ashley left the room, went down the stairs, and into the parlor. No one was there.

Ashley followed the covered walk to the kitchen looking for Grace. Instead she found a rotund black woman doing dishes in a basin supported by four legs. The basin was at her waist. It appeared to make it easier for anyone washing dishes. The black woman's sleeves were rolled up and she was humming a happy melody.

"I beg your pardon," Ashley said feeling like she had entered a sacred place without invitation. The black woman had a spiritual quality to her that Ashley sensed immediately. The tune was a



spiritual melody she was certain. Things were so different here. Perhaps the woman had been in her prayers.

“Good Morning, Mrs. McGillinen,” Dora May greeted with a broad toothy smile.

“Good morning.” Ashley returned feeling instantly at ease.

“Please call me, Ashley. How did you know I was Mrs. McGillinen?”

“When Mr. McGillinen returned, we were told he brought a beautiful young wife who was carrying. There wouldn’t be anyone else here like that except you,” Dora May said drying her hands on a nearby towel. “Take a seat at the table. I’ve kept breakfast for you and Mr. McGillinen in the warming oven.” She hurried across the kitchen to take two flour sacks and pulled the breakfast from a warming oven built into the rock fireplace.

“Do you always refer to Grady as Mr. McGillinen?” Ashley asked sitting on the chair by the table.

“He’d be upset with me if I did. We all call him, Grady,” Dora May said taking the plate to the table. “It just seemed proper to address him formally with a lady like you.”

Ashley grinned. “Please no formality with me. I am Grady’s wife, Ashley.”

“Yes’m,” Dora May replied happily. She did like this wife of Grady McGillinen already. Grace was right. Ashley is the right wife for a fine man like Grady. She placed the plate in front of Ashley.

“You eat every bite. Grace told me this morning you need to get your strength back.”

Ashley looked at the huge plate of potatoes, eggs, bacon, and flapjacks. Normally the large portion would have been rejected for a single boiled egg and toast. Today, she was ravenous. Ashley took the fork and started with the flapjacks. They were heavenly. Between bites she asked, “Where is Grace?”

“She went to Ely’s mercantile. She went to buy yard goods and notions to make you some pretty clothes,” Dora May answered placing a large glass of cold milk next to Ashley’s breakfast. “We also needed some foodstuffs.”

“I was hoping to go with her,” Ashley commented eating her eggs and bacon with relish. For the moment food was important. She had forgotten about Grady.



"Grace wouldn't hear of it. You and that child of yours have been bounced around enough," Dora May said sternly. "You and I are going spend the day together. I'm here to make sure you rest."

"I've had plenty of rest," Ashley disputed. "I would like to see the entire ranch. Could we at least tour the grounds?"

"That we can do," Dora May conceded.

As Ashley was drinking her milk she suddenly remembered what Dora May had said when she entered the kitchen. "You said Grady's breakfast was in the warming oven? Hasn't he eaten yet?" The picture of her husband nestled in the arms of a married woman, Louisa Deptford, charged her English blood like the rattling of sabers.

"He's still abed. Poor man didn't get to bed until early this morning. He and Gus worked on all them papers, mail, and ledgers all night," Dora May stated absentmindedly. Of course she would have no idea what was going on in Ashley's mind. "He would never admit it, but this journey wore him out as well. He needs a good night sleep."

"Does he?" Ashley asked sharply. More visions of Louisa's arms draped over her husband's body filled her mind. "He wasn't in bed when I woke up," Ashley said controlling her emotions as best as she could.

"He's asleep in the guest room, Ashley," Dora May replied calmly. Ashley's tone made Dora May realize Grace had been right. Ashley did catch on to Louisa's flirtations. Ashley was jealous. That was not a good thing so early in a marriage. Dora May tried to think of way to quell the green-eyed monster when Grady appeared in the kitchen.

"Good Morning, Dora May," Grady greeted pulling out a chair next to Ashley. He kissed Ashley on the forehead and sat down. "Good Morning, sweetheart. You look rested. You slept well?"

Ashley lost her anger the moment she saw her husband. He was too handsome by far. He wore a fresh shirt but had left it unbuttoned. Ashley wanted get lost in his arms and feel the muscles of that chest. "I slept well. You weren't with me when I woke up."

"Grace told me I'd better let you rest undisturbed. It was more like a command," Grady responded. "I slept in the west guest room. I can assure you that if you were not rested this morning I would put you back in bed myself. I have no intention of spending another night away from wife."



Ashley was relieved with those words.

Dora May served Grady with his breakfast. It was double the proportion of Ashley's breakfast and had a large steak added to the side. "Grace left early this morning with Louisa," Dora May informed Grady. She was actually reassuring Ashley that Louisa was not around or did not spend an evening with Grady.

Grady merely nodded his head. He was eating his breakfast with relish. "Where's Gus? I thought we'd ride up to the north forty. A ranch hand told me we need to check a new grazing pasture. He wants to move the cattle there as soon as he can.

"He was up early this morning," Dora May answered. "He went as one of the guards with Grace and Louisa."

Grady turned to his wife and cast a spellbinding smile upon her. "What are your plans today, sweetheart?"

"I could check the pasture with you," Ashley suggested hoping to be near her husband all day.

"Man's work. Besides, Grace would chew my hide if I took you out riding today," Grady laughed. "You've been through a lot, Ashley. I intend to sleep with you tonight and ever night."

Those words were more comforting than Grady could ever imagine. If he had been with another woman he wouldn't be saying such things now. "Dora May promised to show the ranch house and grounds."

"Just rest, don't over do."

Ashley felt so assured she decided to tease her husband. "Grady, why didn't you ever tell me you had this Manor house built and waiting? Do you know that during the entire journey I thought I would be living in a Soddy? That was very ungentlemanly of you."

"Living in a Soddy? I'd never bring a wife to a Soddy. You'd better learn that about your husband real quick. My wife will only live in comfort or I'd not brought my wife here," Grady responded

"This," Ashley replied spreading her arms wide. "This is not comfort. This is luxury. I didn't have so many amenities back in Boston. I am treated like a veritable queen."

"You're my queen." Grady stated. "Does this mean you like it?"

"It means I like it," Ashley replied smiling. "I like it and love you forever."



Grady thought he couldn't be happier in his life. He had a feeling Ashley would make his life worth living every day from now on. "There is one thing."

"What?"

"This is a ranch house. I want you to make it a home," Grady said seriously. "Soon part of that will happen when you give me a child. We'll discuss the rest later. Right now I've got to go with Roger to the north forty." He rose from the chair and gave Ashley a delightfully quick passionate kiss on her lips. "Later."

Ashley was feeling much better about everything. It obviously showed in her face.

Dora May finished her dishes and added Grady's to the last of them. She was humming again. She had a feeling that Louisa had just met her match. She wiped her hands with the towel and walked to Ashley. "You want another glass of milk, Ashley? Or do you want to do your ablutions and get dressed?"

"I want to get dressed, but I've been thinking. I really have nothing to wear. All my clothes are tight. The only dress that fits is the brown homespun. That smells so much like horse I really don't want to wear it again," Ashley replied sadly.

"We washed that dress yesterday. I ironed it last night. It's hanging in your armoire," Dora May informed. "One more day of wearing it won't harm. The mercantile has several ready-made mother dresses. Grace is going to buy you one. We'll fit it this afternoon. You can wear that until we make more dresses for you."

"I sew," Ashley offered. "I can't expect you and Grace to do all the work. You have much to do already."

"We employ two seamstresses. They are kept busy making shirts, pants, dresses, and children's clothes. They even sell their work to the mercantile," Dora May explained. "Don't fret that Grace and I will add to our work. Although, we both sew well."

"Dora May, you will have to show me everything," Ashley sighed. "I expected a quiet little cabin and I find a manor with more work and efficiency than Buckingham Palace."

"I heard of Buckingham Palace," Dora May laughed. "I never thought this place would be compared to it. I thought it more like a well run happy plantation."



In the privacy of her room Ashley felt she could broach the question in her mind about Dora May's background. While working with her mother in Boston she had met many plantation slaves. None of them spoke as well as Dora May. "I was wondering," Ashley hesitated. "Your mastery of the English language is amazing."

"For a Negro?" Dora May asked lifting the nightdress over Ashley's head. "Or for a slave?"

"I guess I'm asking where did you get such an education," Ashley replied nervously. She didn't mean to offend Dora May. "I worked with my mother helping to nurse runaway slaves."

"I did get my education on a plantation. The plantation was in Northern Virginia. The master and mistress were kind people. I was born in the plantation house. The master had a child who was my age. He sent me with her as her servant whenever she attended school. I sat or stood against the back wall of the class waiting for her or serving her lunch. The master or school teacher could never imagine I could learn anything," Dora May grinned wickedly. "I did. I even was sent to her private girls school in Maryland. I learned even more. When the miss married correctly in society I was sent back to the kitchen. They didn't know I learned a lot. I spoke as the other slaves. When I was alone I practiced talking proper. I wanted to speak proper for no reason other than I wanted. Then I met my George. We jumped the broom. In the privacy of our room we shared our dreams. I let him know all I had learned. In Maryland I met free Negroes and they told me about the Underground. They didn't know I could read and write. Only George knew that. With his position as butler in the house he had access to newspapers. I read about the underground, the slave hunters. The slave hunters followed patterns. George and I began our plans. My master wasn't cruel like others. I heard about them from George and others." Dora May helped Ashley put on her dress. "I wanted more with my life than to be a slave without dignity. I had read all the books in the master's library. He never knew. Anyway, George and I planned for six years. I had a little boy by then, but everything was planned. We knew where they would look for us and how to avoid the slave hunters. We would use the underground, but unlike others we knew where we wanted to go. We came here. We mined for two years making only enough to survive when we heard about Grady. He was taking slaves in if they made it this far. George



came to this ranch and Grady hired him. You haven't seen him yet, but he's the butler here."

Ashley remembered the black children when she rode in. "What is your son's name and how old is he?"

"Samuel is four years old. My girl Martha is two years old," Dora May answered proudly.

"Where are they?" Ashley asked worriedly. She knew they were too young for the cabin school.

"During the day my children stay with my sister, Esther," She came with us. She can't work. She never was the same in her head after she was raped by guests of the master."

"Your master allowed her to be raped?" Ashley gasped as Dora May buttoned her dress leaving the last two buttons opened.

"He never knew. We slaves couldn't tell him. They were brutal. It took Esther a week to heal from their brutality. She was only fourteen."

Ashley turned and took Dora May's hands. "I'm sorry."

"You had nothing to do with it," Dora May dismissed. "There are good people and bad people. The important thing is to see which ones are good and which ones are bad. We need to stay away from the bad. George and I are happy here. We're free. Our children are free. Our children will get a fine education. We've got a good life. I work for my living. I don't slave for it." Dora pulled Ashley out of the room. "I need to put an apron on you. We don't need to let this dress get dirtied." She didn't want to tell her she wanted the apron tie to cover her open buttons.

"How many runaway slaves are here?" Ashley inquired as she was led down the stairs.

"We've had as many as five families," Dora May answered. "They've all moved on to start their own ranches or farms further south. Right now we have two families." She pulled Ashley into a small eating room near the parlor. In a polished carved cabinet she pulled out a crisp white apron. "There you are," Dora smiled tying the apron with a large bow that covered the open buttons. "Don't you look smart?"

Ashley smoothed the apron down her homespun dress. She noticed the larger middle rounding out the apron. "Oh my, I am quite large."



“A healthy child is growing there,” Dora May beamed. “Grady will have a large child to be certain.”

Ashley let out a breath of anticipation, “Well, let’s get started. Show me this ranch house.”

Grace was usually quiet around Louisa. She didn’t really like Louisa’s attitude. She tried to understand it. Louisa wasn’t a wicked woman. She was a good mother to her children. Louisa was a good wife with the exceptions of her fantasy about Grady. Today Grace was simply on her guard that those fantasies about Grady wouldn’t embarrass him with the local people of Ely.

In the mercantile Grace went about her business selecting yard goods, ribbons, laces, and notions for making dresses. She selected two of the best mother dresses the store carried. One was a pink and red striped satin dress. The other was a dark green linen dress. Grady would like the green dress. She had selected several yards of burgundy velvet, sapphire blue, forest green, and lavender satins, as well as brightly colored calico and subdued earth color linen.

Louisa purchased foodstuff items on the list Grace had given to her.



Chapter 14

Grace found the doll Grady had asked her to purchase for Julia. Quickly she gave it to Jim Rutledge. "Put this is with the yard goods." Rutledge obeyed and wrapped it carefully in the white brocade she had just purchased. It was done in the nick of time. Louisa came walking up to her. Grace would follow Grady's request, but she wouldn't give Louisa the advantage of knowing it right now.

"I finished off the list," Louisa said. She was hoping to return to the ranch as soon as possible. Grady was home again. She could be near him. At first she was upset that he had brought a wife with him, but through her restless night she began to think it didn't matter. She was a married woman. They could still have a heady affair. How often did she dream of being in Grady's arms when Jake was having his way? Jake was handsome by standards. He resembled Grady, but he didn't have the money Grady did. She fancied herself wearing the latest fashions, living in a grand manor, and using Grady's servants as her own. She could be Grady's mistress. Jake wouldn't know. He was always chasing one rainbow or another. Grady's wife wouldn't care. She was from the east. Women closed their eyes to such things in the east.

The only real problem Louisa had was getting Grady to show interest in her. She was always near him when he was at the ranch. She raced to fill his wants or needs when she could get Grace out of the way. The only thing that gave her any hope was her daughter, Julia. Grady doted on her like a loving uncle. The birth of Jake's son gave her a little leverage with the rest of the village. Jaygee looked a lot like Grady. Of course Jaygee resembled his father, Jake. But she had intimated Grady might be the father with incriminations. She even gave Jaygee Grady's name. Louisa was certain some of the people did believe she was already Grady's mistress. It was a heady feeling she enjoyed with her fantasy.

"I've finished here as well," Grace announced. Rutledge would load all the purchases in the buckboard. Gus and the ranch



hands had gone to the livery to check on inquiries for horses from the army. They would purchase any needed livery items and then go to the Ely saloon for a beer. Grace did not hold that relaxation against the men. They worked hard. If looking at those painted women gave them a small pleasure she felt they deserved it as long as they weren't married. To Grace, marriage was sacred. "I thought we might noon at the Ely Restaurant and return to the ranch."

Although Louisa would have preferred to return without lunch she wouldn't turn down a meal at the restaurant. She liked being waited on.

It was a pleasant lunch. Everything had gone smoothly when Olga Liegeman came into the restaurant. Olga was one of Ely's Christian Women's Societies and one of the social leaders. Her husband had been a German miner that did find a gold vein and used the money for investment before it ran out. He was doing well with those investments. They ran the only boarding house in town and he owned the Ely newspaper.

"Mrs. Castle, Mrs. Deptford," Olga acknowledged smugly. She felt she was above all the employed at Grady's ranch. "I hope everything is well at the ranch with Mr. McGillinen off to parts unknown in the east."

"He's returned already," Grace informed quickly. She wasn't about to reveal any more than that. It was none of the busy body's business. Her husband kept the census. She would learn soon enough the Grady brought a wife and a child would be born.

"Herman told me you had a child," Olga purred. She was proud of the knowledge she obtained since her husband was a census keeper. "A boy I believe. Jacob Grady? How nice you named him for his father and your benefactor."

"There was nothing for it. Jaygee looks like Grady," Louisa intimated. Every one knew Jake worked a little and then chased another rainbow.

Grace raised a brow at Louisa's audacity. This is exactly what a vicious gossip like Olga would love to pass all over town. She came with a counter immediately. "Of course the boy looks like Grady. Jake has the same hair and eye color as Grady. I think it proper to name a boy after such a benefactor as Grady McGillinen."

Olga reddened. She knew exactly what Louisa meant. She would just be careful how she phrased her tidy bit of gossip. She had



little respect for the upstart Irishman, but Herman liked Grady McGillinen. To Herman they were both self-made men. Olga resented that Grady seemed to get wealthier every day. “How is Jake? I heard he left right after the boy’s birth. Checking land near Carson City I heard.”

Grace didn’t give Louisa an opportunity to plant any more intimation. “You know very well letters take longer than that to arrive from any distance like Carson City. Jake has only been gone six weeks.”

“I heard he left with Indians,” Olga sneered.

“He left with two of Grady’s ranch hands,” Louisa defended. She would not have her name dragged in the mud by this bitty with associating her with savages. She thought nothing of spreading ideas about a relationship with a rich man like Grady. That was socially acceptable in eastern standards. Besides she never openly admitted to sleeping with Grady. She let other people assume as they wished with her innuendos.

“We’d best be going,” Grace urged rising from the table leaving the cost of the meals on the table plus extra for a tip.

Louisa followed quickly. She was anxious to return to the ranch and be near Grady.

Dora May had finished showing her the ranch house. Ashley was overwhelmed. It was as large as her father’s mansion in Boston, but had fewer rooms. Instead the rooms were larger, especially the private combination bathing commode rooms. More incredible was a flushing water closet. When Ashley pulled a cord, water stored in an attic tub would flush the contents in the commode down a clay pipe that led outside to a pit similar to an outhouse. To fill the attic tub one simply used a pump in the bathing room. Ashley learned Grady had on his payroll a man fascinated by ancient Roman plumbing and created this complex piping system throughout the entire house. It was a job he loved for the challenges. Cool water for bathing ran through pipes. All what was needed was a bucket or two of hot water from the stove. Dora May had told her Elmer Mason was working on developing a way to heat hot water safely through the pipes but hadn’t come up with a way as of yet. The rooms had been professionally finished with plaster. Some were painted, some had wallpaper, but few were furnished. Grady had furnished his favorite rooms with local



artisans and some furniture he purchased in San Francisco and had shipped to the ranch. His bedroom, two guest rooms, the study, part of the library, the kitchen, and a small dining area were those rooms he furnished. The rest of the house was empty. Ashley had a natural talent for decorating. She had in the past assisted her sisters when helping their friends set up new homes after they were married. Her art instructor at school told her she had a natural talent in blending colors, fabrics, and furniture. She expected a Soddy and she was happily facing a challenge of decorating a mansion. She was excited and couldn't wait to meet the challenge.

Ashley was excited about the mansion, but she was amazed at the tiny village surrounding the house. There were Chinese, Negro, Mixed, and White populations. Ashley believed there had to be at least twenty children. She saw old miners and their wives. The women did wash and the old men tended to repair equipment and livery. The Chinese she was told did certain laundry, farmed, or cooked food. She was told everyone worked doing something. There was a lot of work to be done.

The children surrounded Ashley pulling at her apron. The older children asked, "Are you the new lady?"

Ashley bent to touch the children's face or hands. "I guess I am." She was sweet to the children. She thought of the child growing in her.

The parents of the children greeted her warmly. She accepted their welcome and thanked them. She also made a complimentary comment or two on whatever project they worked on.

Ashley had nooned alone with Dora May. The two women had finished touring everything but the barns and stables by late afternoon. They walked toward the barn when Ashley saw the buckboard coming up the pathway. She waved to Grace. Gus was driving the buckboard. His horse Rogue was tied behind the wagon. The buckboard looked heavily loaded. She was curious to see what Grace had purchased.

Gus pulled the buckboard up in the front of the ranch. The ranch hands dismounted turning the horses over to older hands to be curried. The hands started unloading the buckboard taking it to places Grace ordered.

"Goodness," Ashley commented walking toward Grace. "You purchased quite a bit."



"Nearly bought out the mercantile," Gus laughed. "She left old Rutledge happier than a pig in mud. Left quite a dent in Grady's wallet ta be sure."

"Oh dear," Ashley gasped.

"Jest kiddin," Gus assured. "We got plenty of coin. Where's Grady?"

"He went to the north forty. He hasn't come back yet," Ashley replied.

Louisa stiffened. She should know where Grady was. It grated her that his wife answered the question. She straightened her back. "I'll collect Jaygee and Julia from Esther."

"I'm glad Grady isn't back yet," Grace said taking a brown package from the back of the buckboard. "I've got a pretty surprise for you. Let's go up to your room."

Ashley followed skipping lightly like a child expecting a piece of candy. She was excited about a surprise from Grace.

In her room grace opened the package to reveal a lovely dark green linen mother's dress. It had a forest green cord for a belt to loosen as the mother's abdomen grew. The design was fashionable with a white collar and tiered skirt. The tiers had dark green ribbon on the outside hem. "Oh Grace," Ashley cried fighting her tears. "It's so lovely."

"Let's get you dressed before Grady gets home," Grace chuckled mischievously. "I can't wait to see his eyes pop out after seeing you in that plain dress so long."

"The dress was practical for the journey," Ashley defended. In her heart she was thrilled to wear a pretty dress once again.

Grady had ridden farther than the north forty with Roger. They rode to ridge that marked the end of his property. The sheep in that grazing pasture needed to be checked. An old Irish miner and his Shoshone wife watched over the sheep up there. He liked to check on them once and awhile. He would ask if they needed anything. If they did, a ranch hand would bring it out on the buckboard. The Shoshone kept a hand with Sean O'Malley since he married one of their women. They had two sons, James and Edward. They were in their young teens and good shepherds. Their father had taught them well. He also rode west of the forty to check on other grazing land. He came across two miners digging on his land. He gave them a warning and watched



them leave to start digging on the other side of his land. Roger was instructed to set watch along the creek bed and make certain no one started digging up his land. He hated to see the earth ripped open leaving open wounds. In Ireland he had been raised to appreciate and love the land. The Shoshone had taught him even more respect. He had been invited to their councils. Most of the complaints from the people had been that the white man did not honor Mother Earth. They complained how they ravaged her lands and raped her soils. He felt an affinity to that complaint. He did his utmost not to disturb the land. He forbade any mining other than necessity in his mine. Only a few trusted people worked the mine. Those men were highly paid and happy to keep the secret. If trees were cut for lumber, the hands were to make certain there were saplings to grow new trees or saplings were planted. He even built the ranch house and village cabins in an open area sheltered by a copse of trees.

Grady was tired when he rode Spirit into the stable. Spirit was worn out also. Grady still gave Spirit a good rub down. He went to the horse trough, pumped fresh water and washed the dirt and grime from his face and hands. He knew Grace would rail him well if he didn't clean up before he walked into the house. He would take a hot bath and be clean for dinner and bed. "Ah, Ashley," Grady moaned when he thought of his bed.

"He's back Mrs. Grace," Timmy announced running into the parlor. He was out of breath. When he saw Grady washing his face he ran as fast as his little legs could take him. Grace was in the parlor having tea and scones with Ashley. They had been planning the evening meal. Grace had just explained to Ashley that Grant left early in the morning with a hand to visit the Shoshone camp. He was not expected to return for several days. It was Grant's plan to spend some time in the camp.

Grady walked into the house and went straight to the parlor. Grace followed a firm schedule. This was her teatime. He knew Ashley would be with her. He missed her. That was crazy. He had been with her yesterday. They had just been apart a day and he missed her. When he walked in he felt his heart stop. Ashley looked like a queen in court. Her cup of tea was in one hand a scone in the other.

The welcoming look of love she gave him caused him to feel like he was melting. Without a thought he walked to her and kissed her.



Ashley barely had a moment to place her cup and scone on the table before she was enveloped in Grady's crushing embrace. His kiss was desperately as passionate as she felt.

"Ashley, you look radiant," Grady breathed between kisses. "That dress becomes you. I missed you."

Ashley pulled back for a breath of air. "Grady, I missed you desperately all day. When I woke up and found you weren't there I was distressed."

Grady held her tightly. "I promise you we'll not sleep apart again."

"I'll hold you to that vow," Ashley teased snuggling once again against Grady's chest.

Grace looked on with a broad smile. Grady had truly found his happiness. "Would you like some tea, Grady?"

Grady turned to Grace remembering he had an audience. "You know I would prefer coffee."

"I'll get it for you right away," Grace bubbled. She felt as happy as anyone had a right. Grady was like a son she never had and he was happy.

Ashley asked Grady to tell her what he learned on his ride. She was interested in everything he did and about his ranch. They were in deep conversation when Louisa entered the room holding Julia in her arms. Julia was holding a porcelain faced doll dressed in blue satin finery.

"Go to Uncle Grady and say thank you," Louisa prodded putting Julia on the floor.

Was that a sardonic smile Louisa had on her face? Ashley couldn't miss it. Louisa was smiling because she was interrupting her private time with Grady. She tried her best to hide her anger. She didn't want to upset little Julia. The child was an innocent ploy of her mother.

"Uncle Grady, thank you!" the little girl said running to Grady hugging her pretty doll.

Grady opened his arms to the little cherub running to him. He placed her on his lap and let her give him a kiss on his cheek.

"I'm going to call her Victoria. I like that name, don't you?" Julia chirped happily.

"Victoria is a lovely name," Grady agreed. "For a lovely lady."



Ashley was thrilled that Grady was so good and comfortable with children. He would be a good father for their children. Yes, their children. She resented Louisa more when the woman sat on the arm of Grady's chair as if she belonged there.

"Julia and I were surprised with the gift," Louisa purred. "You are kind to us. How did you remember little Julia wanted that doll? It was almost a year ago when she saw it at the mercantile. We had gone with you to buy that furniture you wanted in your study."

Ashley was appalled at Louisa's audacity. She was talking as if she were Grady's wife or mistress? The thought of Louisa as Grady's mistress made her blood boil. To make matters worse in Ashley's mind, Louisa was a married woman. She maintained her dignity, but it took all her strength to maintain a smile. She breathed a sigh of relief when Grace returned with sugar cookies and coffee for Grady.

Grace raised a brow upon entering the parlor to find Louisa sitting on the arm of Grady's chair and Grady holding Julia. She glanced to Ashley to see her plea for help. "Louisa, what a surprise to find you here. I thought you would be in your cabin tending to Jaygee. Isn't it his feeding time?"

Louisa sighed dramatically. "Yes, I should tend to our Jaygee. It's simply that Julia was excited about her new doll she wanted thank her Uncle Grady." She rose from the chair and kissed Grady on the forehead. "Thank you again. Come Julia." She walked out of the room like a duchess leaving her throne room.

"She's as cute as button," Grady commented.

"Louisa?" Ashley asked sharply.

Grady was taken back in surprise. "No, Julia."

Ashley felt foolish and blushed. She said nothing lest she reveal the jealousy that pumped through her heart.

"I sent Billy to fetch hot water for your bath," Grace interrupted in a smooth manner. "You do want a hot bath don't you? You haven't had one since you arrived and you smell like your horse. Unless you were planning to bunk with Spirit tonight? Take your coffee and cookies with you."

Grady raised his hands in surrender. "I take your point, Grace." He took Ashley's hand, brushed his lips across her knuckles. "I'll be ready for supper. You do look lovely in that dress."



Ashley merely smiled. She was exceedingly upset and wanted to talk to Grace alone.

Grace began picking up the china and Ashley pulled her hand to sit by her on the divan. "Is or was Louisa Grady's lover or mistress? I must know!" Her hands were shaking. She had to know but she was also frightened. Louisa seemed comfortable around Grady. Louisa was more comfortable with Grady than his new wife. Ashley was afraid to know, but she had to know.

"That is nonsense. Grady has nor ever will consort with a married woman," Grace defended. "He is an honorable man and the only woman I have ever seen him in love with is you. He'll be faithful as that crazy dog Max is to those stupid mules belonging to Gus."

Tears flooded Ashley's eyes. "I must appear foolish to you, but Louisa seems so comfortable around my husband." She began crying.

"Louisa has a fantasy about Grady, that's all," Grace comforted. "Grady has certainly never encouraged her in any way. We all see how she uses little Julia to stay close to him."

"She calls her son Jaygee. She named him after my husband," Ashley sobbed. "She makes it sound like Grady is the boy's ..." She couldn't say it.

"She infers that Grady is the father," Grace said the final words. She crushed Ashley in her arms. "Grady isn't the boy's father. I swear to that."

"She said he looks like him," Ashley sniffed. She felt comforted with Grace there. She trusted Grace and knew she wouldn't lie to her.

"Jaygee looks like his father, Jake Deptford," Grace assured rubbing Ashley's back. "Jake and Grady have the same hair and eye color. They are both handsome men."

"Then why does she preen my husband like a she cat?" Ashley demanded.

"Grady has lots of money. He's a rich man. Louisa fancies herself as mistress of the ranch. She lives this fantasy for reasons of her own. I can only guess it is because she originally came from a wealthy middle class family from the East. Her family moved to St. Louis for business and her standard of living fell. She fell in love with Jake for his striking good looks. She didn't realize whenever he got money he would spend it chasing one dream after another. Jake makes



sure Louisa has enough money, don't doubt that, but he still keeps chasing dreams. It has gotten worse since they came here. The poor man always hears about Grady. Grady does this. Grady does that. It drove Jake crazy. After the birth of his son and Louisa's insistence on naming the boy Grady drove him away. He's looking to buy land near Carson City. He's hoping to open a livery shop there. Jake has a talent for smithing and animals. He shared with me his frustration. He wants to take Louisa, Julia, and Jaygee away from here for good. He still wanted to provide a good home for them before he came back for them."

"Grady doesn't see what Louisa is doing? I mean throwing herself at him?"

"I love Grady like a son, but sometimes he's as dumb as a stump."

The allusion caused Ashley to laugh. "Thank you, Grace. You are my angel."

"Now that nonsense about Louisa is out of your concern, let us prepare a fine dinner," Grace invited. "You bring the left over scones. It's a shame Grant wasn't here. He wouldn't leave me any leftovers to clean up."



Chapter 15

At dinner they used the private dining area. Grady, Gus, Grace, Ashley, Dora May, and Esther shared the dining table.

Ashley noticed Grace leaving the table at intervals to provide more food for Gus and Grady. Her food did get cold. A smile crossed her face remembering Morning Songs observations about meals in a white man's house. Ashley of course was not expected to serve so her food was hot when she ate it. Ashley was also quite relieved that Louisa was not present. She didn't think she was ready for that yet, but her pique was up regarding Louisa's behavior. If she wanted to protect her marriage she was willing to fight for it.

Esther was wary and was nearly dragged to the dinner table. Dora May had made progress with Esther the past year they had lived on the ranch. She was not about to let Esther step backward into her panic states. Esther took care of the smaller children when needed. She was always good at that, but it helped bring her out of the cabin. She no longer screamed hysterically when she saw a white man. Esther was only wary of white men.

Grady and Gus were completely aware at Dora May's gentle handling of her sister to help her start to live life once more. Esther was an attractive black woman. She was about twenty years old with a soft gentle way about her. Grady and Gus were full of rage when they were told what happened to the fourteen year old Esther. They both vowed to themselves if they ever met those men they would beat them to a pulp and then geld them. Grady and Gus never addressed Esther or even dared to look at her knowing that would set fear in her heart. They conversed naturally and calmly about every day things.

Dora May would interact with Grady and Gus giving Esther an example of communication without fear. Dora May was desperately trying to bring her sister back to the happy person she once had been. She wanted Esther to know that not all white men were evil and cruel.

Ashley understood what was going on and blended into the casual quiet conversation with the men and the women. She adored



Grady even more at that table. He was a kind man through and through.

After dinner Grady and Gus went to the study.

Ashley attended to her bath with the assistance of Dora May and Esther. When she had finished she put on the one silken nightgown she had brought with her from the East. The clothes she had brought with her had now all been laundered. Dora May and Esther left through the hall door. Ashley entered the bedroom from the other door. She was surprised to see Grady in bed waiting for her. She was certain he was completely naked since a sheet covered only his private area and legs. His broad muscular chest was inviting her fingers to touch it.

Grady patted the bed next to him with a large smile. "Come to me, wife."

Ashley returned his smile and walked sensually to her husband. She walked up the steps and slid under the covers stopping when she was comfortably ensconced next to that magnificent chest of her husband.

"That's the way it should be," Grady beamed taking Ashley into his arms. "Every night."

"Mmm," Ashley agreed feeling marvelous and secure.

"We are finally alone and it is quiet," Grady whispered for no reason other than he felt like it. "What do you think of the ranch?"

"Geneva."

"Geneva? What is that?" Grady queried inhaling the essence of rose that was his Ashley. She must have used that rose scented soap he purchased and they had used on the journey in the hot spring.

"Geneva is a French word that describes a magnificent fir treed mountain range. I felt an affinity the moment I saw this valley," Ashley replied. "This land is a part of you and a part of me now. I love it as I love you."

"When Gus and I first saw this valley we felt it too. We had talked for several years about realizing the only paradise there would ever be would be the paradise we built for ourselves," Grady reminisced. "Governments provide only burdens. Government has never or will ever provide justice and equality. We saw horrors reigned upon slaves like Esther. We saw horrors reigned upon the Indians. The lot of our nation is no different than the oppression of European countries."



"I understand what you are saying," Ashley agreed. "I saw such horrors when I worked with mother's charities. Still it is sad to think that this country would not be better and more hopeful than being oppressive. If we can't believe in our government it would result in anarchy."

"No not anarchy. If you abide by the rules and play their political games we can still create our paradise, our hope." Grady yawned. He was more tired than he had thought. "You can see Gus and I have created our hope within the confines of legality. If you have the money, you can use it to make things better."

"My Geneva and your hope," Ashley said lovingly. "You have done well. This ranch of yours is smoothly run and a haven for people that just need a boost. I'm proud of you and Gus."

"I always thought when the time came I would finally name our ranch," Grady brightened for a moment. "You've completed our hope. I'll get the papers drawn tomorrow. Our brand will be GH. This ranch is hereby christened Geneva's Hope." He yawned again. It was getting harder to stay awake.

Ashley swelled with pride. She truly belonged here officially. "Geneva's Hope," Ashley repeated softly. "It suits."

"Ah, my Ashley," Grady yawned again. "I want you to make this house a home. I want you to fill it with furniture and decorate to your taste. I want this house to be our home. It must have your touch, our Geneva's Hope."

Ashley was ecstatic. She leaned her head on Grady's shoulder and began discussing that she would like to start with the nursery. It must be across the hall for now. She wanted to do it with muted green because green was Grady's favorite color. She wanted a cradle, but first a basket. A newly born was too tiny and fragile to be in a cradle first thing. She wanted the drapes to be striped green. That is where she found the color she wanted for the room. Grace had purchased such fabric at the mercantile. "What do you think, Grady?"

A soft even breathing sound was her answer. She turned to look at Grady. He was sleeping soundly. He looked like a little boy, so innocent, so wonderful. Ashley sighed happily. Their son would look like him. Louisa's words came back to mind. Jaygee looked like Grady. Oh no, this was something that would be addressed. The thought was pushed out of her mind. This night was filled with



happiness. She was living in Geneva's Hope. Her eyes fluttered and soon she was sound asleep in Grady's arm.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Grady greeted her seductively. "I missed out last night."

"Missed out?" Ashley replied sleepily. Her eyes were focusing. She was concentrating on waking up.

"I was too tired," Grady teased. "Didn't think I'd ever be too tired. Today I'll not be gone on the range." He untied the bows on her nightgown. His fingers invaded the nightgown playing with her feminine globes. His lips began teasing the soft flesh of her neck and ear lobes.

Ashley felt the fire start in her body. There were times all Grady had to do was look at her and she burned. When he played with her body she flamed. Her hands splayed across his chest fingering every muscle. She sighed in need.

Grady's hand moved to Ashley's thighs and raised the nightgown until he could remove it. He stopped his kissing only long enough to lift the nightgown over her head.

His mouth moved to her breast. He began to suck and nip at the hardened bud. "I could make love to you for a hundred years and still find the excitement as it was our first night."

Ashley arched to his attack on her body. She realized the moans were coming from her. She wanted to become one with Grady. The natural instinct of mating was strong and pleasurable. She felt Grady's fingers invade her private apex. His fingers were probing in and out massaging the soft fold. Her body responded with greater heat. She pulled Grady's hair in need. He lowered himself lavishing her navel with his tongue.

Grady went lower seeking the soft folds he wanted to kiss in adoration. His mouth found his prize.

Ashley shrieked and bucked when Grady's teeth nipped her feminine bud. He was merciless as he kissed and nipped. He drove her to ecstasy. Her body shook uncontrollably in the greatest orgasm her body had achieved making love with her husband. She came down from her orgasm slowly. Her body floated on a cloud of pleasure.

Grady held back enjoying Ashley's pleasure. When her breathing was nearly normal and her body stopped shaking he entered the heated warmth. His Ashley was wet for him. This was ecstasy



that few men could ever achieve. He knew that. He moved in her slowly at first. She tightened around him drawing him in deeper and deeper.

Grady was straining with everything he had. Beneath him he felt Ashley's legs wrap around his thighs. In a pleasure spasm he released inside of his Ashley. He shook with his spasm emitting a guttural growl. "Ashley."

They lay together slick perspiration and skin together. Each of them felt their racing hearts.

"Grady, you make it so wonderful."

"So do you."

They lay together kissing each other with reverence for sometime. At last they broke apart.

Grady's stomach rumbled.

"I think you're hungry," Ashley quipped.

"No, I'm quite sated," Grady chuckled. "My wife has once again worn me out."

"A wanton is she?"

"Thank the Lord!"

Ashley rose from the bed. "I shall thank this Lord of yours myself. You are a randy."

"Not bad for a virgin," Grady boasted.

Ashley turned her head. What did he say? "You knew I was a virgin."

"Yes, but you didn't know I was."

"You can't be!" Ashley gasped. "You bring such pleasure. Surely you had vast experience."

"No, my love. What we have doesn't require experience. It is simply magic."

"Wonderful Irish magic," Ashley conceded. "We were both virgins?"

"Yes."

"You've never slept with another woman?"

"As pure as the driven snow, like you sweetheart."

"Magic!" Ashley declared walking toward the bathing room to wash.

In the bathing room it struck her. Jaygee could not be Grady's son. If he was virginal he never could have slept with Louisa. "Why that little liar!" Ashley said softly.



“What was that?” Grady asked entering the bathing room. He pumped water to the basin for the both of them. He handed her the rose soap and a cloth.

“I’m curious,” Ashley said.

“About what?” Grady replied stropping his razor.

“How is it that a handsome specimen of a man like you, was never lured into a woman’s bed?”

“Gus for the most part, my family upbringing for rest of it,” Grady answered while he lathered his soap.

“Gus?” Ashley questioned washing her arms and torso with the cool scented soaped cloth.

“He put the fear of God into me about scheming, conniving, and pox ridden whores,” Grady chuckled beginning to shave. “My Irish Catholic upbringing warned me against the wrath of God if I indulged in such activities before marriage. The joining of a man and woman is supposed to be for procreation only.”

“Then how did you know what to do?” Ashley pursued washing her legs and thighs. “I certainly had little knowledge of the conjugal bed.”

“Ah, my love. I spent two years aboard a ship with forty or more sailors. They had very descriptive tales to tell,” Grady laughed. “I remembered many of their stories. I also have had knowledge of husbandry while our cattle bred and we bred horses. It’s a natural instinct. With us that natural instinct is combined with Irish Magic.”

All the explanations were filtered through Ashley’s mind and accepted. She believed Grady and it was a heady feeling to know that her husband was hers only as she was his only. She would stop Louisa fantasy as soon as possible. Grady was her territory. A she cat, if necessary, Ashley would become one.

After they finished dressing, Grady and Ashley descended the staircase together. He held her hand upon his forearm. He felt like a grand king with his queen by his side. He had not a care in the world and certainly didn’t think there were any rough waters about.

Ashley on the other hand was about to create great waves that would swamp a mendacious woman. How dare Louisa implicate her husband’s honor?

Grady couldn’t keep the smile off his face. He truly was about the happiest man in Utah Territory. “I’ll be going into Ely today,” Grady announced when he finished his breakfast. “Brian Duffey is my



new solicitor. He just moved into Ely last year. I have paperwork to go over with him.”

“I’ll come with you,” Ashley said eagerly.

“No, sweetheart,” Grady stated firmly. “I pushed you enough to get here. In your condition you need only to rest and enjoy decorating this house. Understood?”

Ashley nodded shyly. “I love you.”

Grady gave her the bright Irish smile and left the table. “I’ll be back before the evening meal.”

Ashley spent the day sharing her decorating scheme for the nursery with Grace. They went to the seamstress’s cabin and found the light green striped material.

Grace took the bolt of material to the nursery.

Ashley took a pad of paper and charcoal. She started sketching the furniture she wanted in the room as well as a few sketches of the placement and decoration of the furniture. Grace had finished measuring the window for the draperies when Ashley showed the sketches to Grace. “What do you think?”

Grace scrutinized the sketches. “These are wonderful. You have a natural talent. I can’t wait to start this. We’ll talk to Tom Jenkins the cabinetmaker. He can create anything from wood. I’ll order more of this material for the walls and we’ll whitewash the wainscoting for the bottom half. It’s a good thing we started early on this project.”

“I know it is unladylike, but I think we missed the noon meal. I’m hungry,” Ashley confessed.

Grace looked out the window to the sun. “I believe we did. It is not unladylike at all. You are feeding two people. I’ll make the meal right now.”

Ashley sat in the parlor where Grace placed her with carded wool and knitting needles. Ashley was starting the first stitches of a woolen baby blanket. Her first child would be born in December and Grace told her it would be cold. Grace also promised to show her an Aran stitch pattern she had learned from a former Irish resident that once lived on the Aran Islands. Ashley hadn’t seen or heard from Louisa today. She was relieved in a way. Ashley was having a wonderful day and a face to face with Louisa would have spoiled it.



For the first time a tall slender black gentleman dressed in fine livery appeared in the parlor.

"You must be George," Ashley guessed.

"Yes'm," George bowed. "There is a gentleman here to see Massah Grady. I told him the Massah wouldn't be here until this evening. He asked to wait."

"I'll see him, George," Ashley said putting down her needles. "Show him in. Did he give you a name?"

"He didn't have to Ma'am. It's Jake Deptford. He just rode in. He's still dusty from the trail."

"I'll see him, George," Ashley stated. She smiled at the all too serious butler. He had been trained on a plantation.

Ashley inhaled quickly when the man walked into the parlor. He was the same height but a slightly different build than her Grady. His hair color and eye color were the same as Grady. His facial features were different. His chin was square with a cleft. His nose was longer. His brows met at the bridge of his nose. He was a handsome man Ashley observed. Of course he wasn't as handsome as her husband.

"Ma'am," Jake said shyly. "I was told Grady had married. Congratulations."

"Thank you, we are very happy," Ashley replied graciously. "Please sit down."

"I can't Ma'am. I'm all dusty from the trail," Jake excused turning his hat in his hand nervously.

"You can't stand all day waiting for my husband," Ashley chuckled. "There is a chair over there, bring it here and sit."

Jake walked awkwardly to the chair and pulled it to the fireplace near the divan Ashley was seated upon.

"I'm surprised you didn't go to Louisa first," Ashley commented freely speaking her mind. "You haven't seen your son and daughter in what? Six weeks?"

A proud smile crossed Jake's face. "He's a fine boy. Julia is as pretty as a picture. Louisa is a beautiful woman. I'm fortunate for that."

"But you sought Grady first?"

"I don't want to see Louisa, yet. I can't face her until I know that everything is going to work out and I can finally provide proper for her," Jake said defensively. He looked sad.



"I'm here. Perhaps I can assist you," Ashley volunteered. She wanted to smooth away that defeated look. "It's perfectly fine to tell me. I am his wife. We share everything."

"I don't know," Jake hesitated. He was pushed for time. He had to get back to Carson City as quickly as possible. Finally something good had happened and for a few more dollars he might lose it. He took the chance. "I ain't too proud to ask for help when I need it Ma'am."

Ashley smiled and waited silently.

"I've saved all the money I earned breaking horses for Grady. I gave Louisa half. The other half I needed to buy a livery outside Carson City. I heard about it from some miners that stopped here," Jake shared his voice was a bit shaky.

"You went to see it?"

"Yes'm. It's in fine shape. The blacksmith that owned it died. His widow is taking the money and returning to her family in St. Louis. It's a great deal. I bought it on the spot and started working it. It has a fine clapboard house with it. Nice furniture that Louisa would like," Jake related proudly.

"Then why do you need help?" Ashley questioned.

"I bought some new equipment. The Carson City Bank gave me a loan to buy it. I thought I could make the money blacksmithing to cover it, but the old equipment broke down. The new bellows is coming in two weeks and the loan is due about the same time. I'll lose it if I can't come up with the money," Jake explained. "I can't lose it. I can't lose it this time. Louisa would never forgive me. I'm so close."

"How much money do you need for the loan?" Ashley inquired.

"I got most of it. I just need \$100 in Federal notes. I swear I'll pay it back," Jake said in desperation.

Ashley had that much in cash in her reticule. She never left anywhere in Boston without at least that amount or more. She hadn't thought about that since they were married. Instinctively she knew he would take offense at taking a loan from a lady. She rose from the divan. "I'm certain Grady would give you the money. Give me a moment. I'll draw up the loan papers."

Ashley went into their room and opened the armoire that contained her private clothes. She pulled out her reticule. Inside she



found two fifty dollar notes and several \$20 gold coins. Ashley took the two fifty dollar notes and put them upon the writing desk. She sat at the desk and quickly wrote a letter of loan with Grady's name.

Jake was standing at the window looking out. He looked so sad. He was nervous. He turned his hat over and over again in his hands.

"Mr. Deptford," Ashley addressed. "Here are the funds you requested and a letter of loan for you to sign."

He spun around with a look of hope. He crossed the room to the center table and took Ashley's offered pen. He signed the note. His eyes looking bright for the first time since she met him.

"Grady is a lucky man," Jake smiled. "He's almost as lucky as I am. I'll do real good and pay him back. At last I can give Louisa all the fine gewgaws she admires. I can get Julia purty dresses and fine ribbons. My son will grow up proud of me. I can tell Louisa that at last."

"It must be hard for you living in Grady's shadow," Ashley said in understanding.

"It's very hard, Ma'am. All Louisa does is talk about how great Grady is. He is of course, but it's hard on a man to know he's a failure in his wife's eyes."

"You're a fine man, Jake Deptford," Ashley praised.

"Thank you again, Ma'am," Jake appreciated. "Don't tell anyone I was here, please. I intend to come back for Louisa and my children in a fine buckboard. Louisa will leave with me in style."

"I have to tell, Grady," Ashley reminded.

"Of course," Jake acknowledged. He left the house and rode off.



Chapter 16

Grady was undressing for bed when Ashley came into the room from the bathing room. She was already dressed in her nightgown.

"Jake Deptford rode in today," Ashley revealed brushing her long hair to braid it.

"I didn't see him when I rode in," Grady replied casually. "Anything important he needed to see me about?"

"Actually he needed a small loan," Ashley responded.

"Humph," Grady said removing his boots. "The man is always chasing rainbows."

"Has he borrowed money before?" Ashley queried wondering for a moment if she did the wrong thing.

"No, that is something he never has done. He's never asked to borrow money. He's a hard worker. He's a talented blacksmith, good with horses, a fine ranch hand, and he's good at breaking horses. He has an affinity with the horses. He breaks them gently, the Shoshone way," Grady informed. "He works real hard and saves his pay. He leaves money with Louisa and takes off with the money chasing one rainbow after another. A man shouldn't leave his wife and family. He's a good worker, he could provide properly for Louisa and the children. Instead he leaves them behind. He needs to stay and take care of his family."

Ashley was shocked. Her husband had shown her to be open minded and kind. This was the first she had ever heard him to be bigoted like that. Didn't he see the pain in the man's eyes? He wasn't chasing rainbows. Jake was trying to better himself to meet the high ideals of his wife, Louisa. Grady had the Midas touch. Everything he touched turned to gold. Not all men were so bestowed by the Gods.

"I gave him the loan," Ashley said quietly.

"You what?" Grady shouted turning around and staring at Ashley accusingly. "You didn't give him money?"

"It was a small amount," Ashley responded plaiting her hair. She was nervous and angry.



“Just what is a small amount?” Grady demanded hotly. “I would have never given him a loan. He’s a dreamer. He chases rainbows.”

Ashley’s temper grew exponentially. “Then I’m glad you weren’t here when I loaned him the money.

“How the Sam Hill can you loan him money?” Grady demanded heatedly.

“I had my own money to loan. I had it from Boston,” Ashley returned as angrily.

Grady stood trying to calm his temper. The rainbow chaser had taken his wife’s money. “Tell me the kind of man that would take money from a woman?”

“He thought the money was yours,” Ashley told him.

“Ashley, how could you do such a thing?” Grady said in exasperation. He ran his fingers through his hair pulling his scalp.

Ashley was furious. She admired his decisions and respected his ideals. He should at least respect her decisions. “Tell me one thing, Grady. Did you ever discuss Jake’s rainbows?”

“I don’t understand,” Grady excused.

“You do understand,” Ashley sniped angrily. “Did you ever discuss any of Jake’s trips with him. Did you ask him where he was going and what he was planning to do?”

Ashley’s tone put Grady on the defensive. The facts were he never talked to Jake about his trips. “That is beside the point. Since he arrived here he would leave and come back. All those rainbow chasing trips were failures.”

“You discussed that with him?”

“I didn’t have too!” Grady snapped.

“Then just how did you know he was rainbow chasing? How did you know he failed? How could you make these judgments if you didn’t have the facts.”

“Louisa told me,” Grady shouted.

A malicious smile crossed Ashley’s lips. “I see. Louisa told you Jake was out chasing rainbows. Louisa told you Jake failed at everything. Those are the only facts you need. Yet, your own wife makes a decision and you reprimand her for assisting a man that is close to finalizing a dream.”

“Wait a minute,” Grady bellowed. He was becoming more defensive every moment. “Wait just a gall darn minute!”



"How interesting," Ashley cooed going in for the kill. "I am berated for helping another from the great helper of mankind, Grady McGillinen. The great benevolent Grady McGillinen will not assist a man degraded and berated by a wife that holds up the Grady McGillinen as the icon of all mankind."

Grady grit his teeth. "Would you mind explaining that remark?"

"I don't need too. There is no doubt you understand my meaning. Think about it, Grady McGillinen," Ashley dared her husband. "Unless you spoke to Jake, unless you heard what he was doing with that money, you have no right to speak to me in this manner."

Grady stood there. He couldn't speak, he couldn't move. He was furious and he wasn't certain why.

"I'm going to bed," Ashley growled and marched out of the bedroom. She was walking down the hall when Gus appeared from his room in the west hall.

"Ashley, please come in here," Gus requested.

"I don't know if I should. I'm still extremely upset, Gus."

"That's why I'd like to talk to you."

"You heard our argument?"

"Ashley, everyone on the ranch could have heard that argument."

Ashley had the common sense to blush. "I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. Come in," Gus repeated.

Ashley went into Gus's bedroom. She certainly didn't expect his room to look as it did. The room was huge with a flower patterned wall covering on all the walls. The bed was large with canopy. The canopy coverings, quilt, and pillow shams were sapphire blue velvet. There was an armoire, a large writing desk, and two Queen Anne chairs matching the bed coverings.

"Surprised?" Gus teased watching Ashley's face betray her shock at the surroundings. "You thought I might have a string bed with tick mattress, crazy quilt, deer heads hanging from the wall, and bearskin rugs?"

Gus had the magic to make her laugh, "Actually, yes."

"I thought so," Gus chuckled. "I have to admit even I enjoy the luxury this Geneva's Hope affords."

"Grady told you about the name we came up with?"



“Oh yeah, he was real proud that the two of you came up with the name,” Gus informed. “Have a seat.”

“You’ve found Harvard again,” Ashley teased taking the chair closest to the fireplace.

“Here I can be that person I lost,” Gus smiled. “The other persona is a necessity for dealing with people out here.”

“I actually understand that,” Ashley returned. She was calming down.

“About this fight with Grady about Jake,” Gus referenced. “I didn’t hear what set it off.”

“I loaned Jake \$100 dollars in Federal note,” Ashley responded.

“This Jake told you what the loan was for?”

“Yes. Gus, Grady didn’t even ask what the loan was for. Instead he was angry that I loaned it to Jake,” Ashley sniffed. Tears were about to follow. “He accused Jake of being a rainbow chaser. Grady made a judgment without facts.”

Gus started with a chuckle and let loose with a large guffaw.

Ashley cocked her head in confusion. “Would you share with me what is so humorous?”

“The first sight I had of Grady in Frisco, I thought there was a rainbow chaser. An Irishman seeking the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow,” Gus explained still laughing. “By George if he didn’t find it.”

“With your help,” Ashley added seriously.

“Yes, with my help,” Gus agreed still chuckling. “I guess Grady forgot some people that aren’t completely helpless still need some help.”

“He didn’t even ask me what Jake was going to use the money for,” Ashley repeated in frustration. Her hands balled in tight fists.

“Grady has not once talked to Jake about his trips.”

“Mighty neglectful,” Gus agreed.

“Instead he listened to Louisa and her explanations.”

“That little gel has crawled under his skin, hasn’t she?”

Ashley sighed deeply, “Yes!”

“Louisa acts like she and Grady created little, Jaygee. You’ve heard that?”

“Yes.”

“It isn’t true,” Gus uttered knowledgeably.



"I know," Ashley wept.

"Grady was a virgin until you."

"I know."

"He told you?"

"Yes."

"It is a fact. I kept track of the boy. I would know."

"So he said," Ashley cried openly. "Gus, what am I to do?"

"About what?" Gus questioned. "You can't find a course of action until you figure out exactly what is the challenge or problem."

"Gus, I'm hurt that Grady didn't respect my judgment when I respect his. Most of all I am furious with him for being as dumb as a stump about Louisa and her fantasy."

"We've figured out there are two problems," Gus grinned. "All you need to do is figure out how to tell Grady in a calm manner."

"I want to face down Louisa first," Ashley confessed.

"It seems to me you should do it," Gus agreed. "Louisa is your biggest problem. If Louisa is left unchecked she could drive a rift between you and Grady."

"You've known about Louisa and her fantasy. You've heard and understood her innuendo," Ashley recognized.

"It's true. I couldn't understand how Grady was blind sided to it, but there are some things I don't interfere," Gus confessed. "There have been a number of times I let the boy blunder until he got learning."

"Did you hear what I told Grady about judging without fact, and his benevolence for some but not others?" Ashley blushed in embarrassment.

"Every word," Gus said quietly. "In this argument I take your side. I don't do that normally, but in this case you are in the right. Every man needs to take an accounting of his life once in a while. I think that is what upset him so much. The truth is a deadly sword. When it stabs you, it hurts like hell."

Ashley reached for Gus's hand. She squeezed it gently. "Mankind needs to take an accounting of each life. I need to do that myself. I'll do it tonight, alone."

"Smart gel," Gus approved. "Grady needs time to reflect in his own bog for a night. Make the right moves, Ashley. Identify your goal and achieve it. Identify the obstacles and conquer them."

"Gus, you are so wise," Ashley admired.



“Don’t give me a swelled head, gel,” Gus chuckled. “Next thing I know I’ll get an accounting. I don’t want one, yet.”

“Good night, Gus.” Ashley kissed Gus on the cheek.

“Good night, gel,” Gus returned. He rose from his chair and opened the door. “The best guest bedroom is down two doors.”

“Thank you,” Ashley appreciated. She might not sleep very well tonight, but she would work on a plan of action. She wasn’t going to let any woman get the better of her. She wasn’t going to let any woman come between her and her husband.

Grady flopped on the bed with his pants still on. What the devil happened? He spent the day in town filing legal papers making Ashley his beneficiary. He gave her half title of Geneva’s Hope. He opened a bank account in her name. She could spend those funds any way she wished without accounting to him. Why was he so angry when he found out she gave a paltry \$100 to Jake Deptford?

Ashley’s words bounced over and over in Grady’s aching head. The truth hurt like an arrow in the gut. Ashley was right he didn’t know the facts. He never talked to Jake about his trips. Louisa had constantly complained over and over again what a no good her husband was chasing his rainbows and deserting her and the children. He made a judgment based on her complaints. Lord, he was two kinds of a fool.

Grady was alone in his bed. He had already broken his vow to Ashley of sleeping together every night. What could he do? How could he apologize to his Ashley? What could he say to her to make it right again? Ashley was really angry with him. To make it worse, she had a right to be angry with him. He closed his eyes, but for hours he lay awake hearing Ashley’s accurate analysis of the situation. Grady finally fell asleep some time between midnight and dawn.

Ashley settled her mind and concentrated on her greatest problem with her Grady. It was Louisa. She thought about what she would do, say, and how she would handle the confrontation. *Gus is a wise man indeed.* Ashley was soon sleeping soundly.

Grady woke at dawn, if he slept at all. He dressed quickly and went to the stable. He saddled Spirit and rode into the morning light. He needed time to be alone and think. He hoped in that time Ashley would have calmed down.

Ashley slept in until morning was well on its way into the day.



Grady rode Spirit at a slow trot. He wanted time to think. He was going nowhere in particular and everywhere in general. Grady couldn't remember when he felt so low. If he thought about it, he never in his life had felt this miserable. Everything was excitement to him. Everything until he met this woman that turned him inside out and twisted him once again.

It was an hour later he felt Gus's presence. He knew Gus was near, but if Gus was truly trailing him there wasn't any way Grady would have known. "You want me to stop so you can catch up?" Grady asked the wind.

Gus appeared a moment later from a copse of fir trees riding Rogue.

"I really don't want company," Grady complained leaning his forearms on his saddle horn.

"Yeah, I imagine that's true since ya skipped breakfast ta ride out here and eat humble pie," Gus laughed. "Tastes bitter don't it?"

"I fail to see the humor in this, Gus."

"That argument last night taint funny at all," Gus agreed too readily. "Ya forced ta eat humility is."

"You heard the argument?" Grady queried with embarrassment.

"Boy, ya and Ashley could a waked the dead."

"I don't know what's wrong with her? I never dreamed she would be so stubborn and willful. She accused me of being egotistical. Can you believe it?"

"I don't think there's a thing wrong with her," Gus stated seriously. "It's ya that were wrong here."

"What?" Grady shouted with disbelief.

"Yer didn't even listen ta her. Ya didn't show trust in her ability to understand a matter. Ya never asked her what Jake even said ta her," Grady said shaming Grady. "Ya charged in and acted like the gel didn't have a twit inside her head. No way for a loving husband ta act. A husband should trust his wife and have faith in her."

"She didn't have faith or trust in me. She gave that dreamer money from her own pocket."

"Yer wrong! Ashley has shown nothing but faith and trust in ya. She left her home and family. She followed you into the wilds not knowing where she'd end up. She did it on faith and ya didn't give one pebble of faith ta her."



Grady was stunned. Gus was correct. He remained silent wallowing in his stupidity. He reached for a straw, “She gave money to a dreamer. She wasted her money.”

“Seems ta me that be her right. Don’t think it be your right to condemn a man without trial,” Gus said seriously. “I met a dreamer and rainbow chaser. Don’t rightly know what would a happened ta the boy if we hadn’t a hooked up.”

“Are you referring to me?” Grady challenged.

“If the shoe fits,” Gus answered quietly. “Just seems ta me that dreams and rainbow chaser are better off when they git a little help. It also seems ta me that a man should talk straight ta a man before jumping to judgment. My pappy tolt me never believe anything ya hear and only half of what ya see.” With that last parting shot Gus whispered to Rogue and his horse sped off in the distance at a full run.

Grady sat quietly on Spirit. He took in all of Gus’s words. He remembered Ashley’s words. He put Spirit into a full run. He would talk to Jake when he could, but he still needed to figure out how to say he was sorry to Ashley. He needed to find the correct words to tell her she was right and he was a dad burned fool.

Ashley did her ablutions and dressed without assistance. She didn’t want to bother Grace or Dora May. It was her decision to sleep in a different room. She also wanted time to think about how and what she was going to say to Louisa. She promised Jake she wouldn’t tell Louisa he came to the ranch and she wouldn’t break her vow.

By the time Ashley went to the kitchen her plan was set in her mind. She could kiss Gus. He was so wise.

“Good Morning, Ashley,” Grace greeted cheerfully. She had heard the argument last night. The last thing in her mind would be to bring it up. She loved Ashley and she loved Grady. She heard the argument, but she didn’t hear the words. She wanted to remain completely neutral.

“Good Morning, Grace,” Ashley returned with a smile. “Is there any breakfast left. I’m ravenous.”

“I saved you a plate,” Grace said taking the rags to pull the plate from the warming oven. She took the plate and placed it in front of Ashley. She made corn bread, bacon, and eggs. There was fresh churned sweet butter in a crock on the table. Grace went to the ice chest and offered Ashley a glass of fresh cold milk.



“Thank you,” Ashley appreciated and began eating with gusto. She was hungry in the morning and evening. She was certain it was the pregnancy that increased her appetite. She normally ate light meals during the day and only half of her dinner portions.

“Anything else I can do for you, love?” Grace asked busying herself with folding towels and dusting shelves that had no dust.

“Yes, can I impose upon you to ask Esther to watch Julia and Jaygee this morning?” Ashley requested. “I would like to invite Louisa for tea this morning. If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like you to make your fabulous tea and scones. I’d also impose upon you to serve them in the parlor.”

“You know I’d be more than happy to do that,” Grace replied honestly, but deep in her heart she knew this was the showdown between the women. She knew the argument last night was some how related to Louisa and her intimations. A sly smile crossed her face. If she were a betting woman she’d bet on Ashley as a sure winner. Louisa had airs about her, but Louisa had never run across a real woman like Ashley McGillinen. Grace would bet her month’s pay on it.

Ashley sat demurely on the divan facing the fireplace. The silver tea service shone on the table before her. There were two fine china teacups and saucers. A larger plate contained several of Grace’s freshly baked scones.

Esther went to Louisa’s cabin, extended Ashley’s invitation, and offered to sit with the children.

Louisa accepted the offering smugly. Invited to tea with Mrs. McGillinen? Everyone was talking about the argument between Grady and Ashley last night. Comments were made that Grady rode off just before dawn. Oh, Louisa was smug. She was winning the battle. Ashley would ask her about Jaygee. She could end this farce of a marriage quickly. She would be by Grady’s side to comfort him. This was too good to be true. All of Louisa thoughts were of conquering the modest and impractically out of place city girl.

Louisa normally walked into the ranch house. Today she knocked and allowed George to let her in and announce her presence to Mrs. McGillinen.



Louisa entered the parlor like an eagle swooping down on a dove. Majestic would be the word Louisa would describe herself at that moment.

Ashley was sitting on the divan wearing her simple green linen mother's dress. She had a white apron pinned to the front of the dress. Her pregnancy was becoming more pronounced.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation to tea," Ashley greeted warmly. "Please have a seat." She gave an arm gesture showing her the large wing chair closest to the fireplace. The table would be between her and Louisa. Ashley's father told her positioning and power positioning was important in any discussion. The divan was higher than the wing back chair. She had open area for movement. The wing chair was lower and kept movement confined for the large wings of the chair.

Louisa took her seat in the chair. "I must say I was most surprised to receive a formal invitation from you for tea. You seemed to prefer the more informal."

"Would you like sugar and cream?" Ashley asked politely.

"Cream and one sugar," Louise answered with measured assurance.

"A scone perhaps?" Ashley offered picking up the plate and giving Louisa a napkin with the other."

"Thank you," Louisa said coldly.

"You are welcome," Ashley said quietly. "I do think any relationship we have should be formal, don't you?"

Louisa cocked a brow. She wasn't certain what Ashley was thinking. "I would prefer it."

The battlefield was set.



Chapter 17

Louisa moved back into the chair. She was set for a battle. Surely she could use this to drive a rift between the upstart woman and Grady. She anticipated a frontal assault. She expected Ashley to be hysterical with jealousy. Her mouth dropped open when Ashley spoke. It was she had not expected.

“I was wondering about your husband, Jake,” Ashley commented sipping her tea. “What does he look like?”

“I don’t understand,” Louisa balked. She was trying to regain her ground. What was this woman up to?

“Is he tall or short? Is he muscular or slender? What color is his hair and eyes?” Ashley questioned innocently.

“I fail to see your purpose in such questions,” Louisa replied haughtily. “Surely it makes no difference to you what my husband would look like.”

“He works for Grady,” Ashley insisted. “I have seen many people here that work for my husband. I have not seen Jake working here. I am simply curious. Won’t you aide my inquiring mind? I was told he is temporarily away.”

“Yes, he’s chasing another one of his dreams,” Louisa sneered.

“Jake chases dreams?” Ashley asked with naïve surprise.

“How often does he do this?”

“Often.”

“How often? Does he leave two or three times a year?”

Perhaps it shouldn’t be wise for Grady to continue his employment,” Ashley suggested. She knew that would upset Louisa if Grady didn’t employ Jake at any time, Louisa would have to leave with Jake and go to another place. After talking to Jake just that one time Ashley realized he would take his family with him if he had to leave. She also knew that this time Jake would be successful and Louisa would be leaving soon. The comment obviously did upset Louisa.

“No, not that often,” Louisa excused quickly.



“Tell me about his trips. I believe I heard them called chasing rainbows?” Ashley pushed gently.

“We were married only a few months when he took me away from my family home in St. Louis. He wanted to open a blacksmith shop and livery. When we arrived in Fort Bridger he learned someone had else had already established one. We went on to the city of Ruth. Jake thought the miners going there would need a blacksmith livery. They did, but he didn’t have enough money to build a new one,” Louisa related calmly. There couldn’t be a challenge in relating her dream chasing husband stories. “Instead he ended up working the mines. We barely had enough money to survive. I was carrying Julia. When she was born I could not bear the filth and poverty any more. Julia was about one year old when I heard of this ranch. I was told that Grady and Gus would hire miners that needed help. I was told that clean comfortable cabins were offered to the hired hands. I investigated to learn this ranch could use a good blacksmith and ranch hand. I begged Jake to seek employment. I convinced Jake this life was too horrible to raise a lovely little girl.”

“Jake did come here,” Ashley added to the conversation. “Did he bring you with him at the time?”

“I couldn’t come with him. We only had Jake’s horse at the time. We had to sell our wagon when we arrived at Ruth,” Louisa answered. “Of course Grady did hire Jake and let him borrow a buckboard to bring Julia and I.” Louisa sighed dramatically. “Grady has always been so kind. Jake worked for two years on the ranch. I was happy here. Jake told me he heard about a livery for sale somewhere south of here. I learned I was with child again. I sent him a letter telling him of my condition. I reminded him of his obligation as a husband and father. One month after Jaygee was born he left again for Carson City hoping to buy a blacksmith livery. Just another rainbow.”

“He left you without money for you and the children?” Ashley queried splaying her hand over her breast. She could be an actress if she wanted.

“He always left us money.”

“Did he write when he was gone?”

“Yes, except this time. I haven’t heard from him.”



“Goodness,” Ashley feigned disbelief. “It appears his rainbow and dream has always been owning his own blacksmith shop and livery.”

“Yes,” Louisa agreed sighing heavily. “Of course he will never be the self made man, Grady is. Jake sets his sights too low. Imagine, a goal of being a blacksmith instead of a goal of being a wealthy rancher.”

“You told this to Jake,” Ashley suggested. “That he set his sights to low.”

“Indeed,” Louisa concurred. “Jake doesn’t have the stuff Grady is made of. I continually suggested to Jake that he set his sights higher and learn from Grady. Jake should be more successful.”

“Could it be that Jake would be happy with his own business? Could it be more important to be happy with what you do instead of working at something you didn’t want and have lots of money?” Ashley suggested.

“Who wouldn’t be happy if they had lots of money and power?” Louisa asked in shock. “Money can buy you everything you want. Surely you of all people know that.”

“I married Grady not knowing this was waiting for him. I married Grady for the good kind man he is. I truly believed we would live in a Soddy,” Ashley communicated. “I would have been happy anywhere we lived as long as I was with my husband. Didn’t you love Jake when you married him?”

“Of course I loved him,” Louisa defended. “Who wouldn’t fall in love with a handsome man like Jake. When he started working at a blacksmith shop in St. Louis, why every single woman in a ten mile radius tried to catch his eye.”

“But you caught his eye,” Ashley complimented. “Perhaps because you are as beautiful as he is handsome. What does he look like?”

Louisa was sucked into Ashley’s trap.

“He’s tall, very tall. He’s a little taller than Grady. He has a strong chin with a powerful cleft. He has wavy sandy brown hair. Jake has striking gray eyes with hints of green and gold,” Louisa described. Sometimes Louisa forgot how handsome her husband was. She had been too focused on Grady’s good looks, but more importantly Grady’s social power and money.

“He must look a lot like Grady,” Ashley implied.



"Jake does resemble Grady except for the facial features," Louisa agreed warily. She felt unbalanced and did not understand Ashley's implications.

"I've never seen Jaygee," Ashley said.

"He's too young to be brought out," Louisa excused.

"The weather is perfect. It is healthy to bring a baby outside," Ashley disputed.

"He's my child," Louisa argued.

"Yes, your child and Jake's child," Ashley stated. She went in for the kill. "He is not Grady's child. Your intimations are no longer tolerated. I suggest you stop them immediately. I also suggest that you no longer enter this house without invitation."

"I never," Louisa gasped splaying her fingers across her neck.

Ashley was quite determined to end this farce. "Understand Mrs. Deptford, I am completely in love with my husband. I will not tolerate any hurting him, including spreading innuendos that would tarnish his reputation."

Louisa swallowed. It never occurred to her that intimating Grady was Jaygee's father might harm Grady's reputation. In her dreams she wanted Grady, his wealth, and ranch. She wanted to be the wife of a wealthy and powerful man. "I don't know what you are saying," Louisa pleaded with innocence. "I think I shall leave."

"Of course," Ashley accepted graciously. "Remember my words."

Louisa was furious. She had just been ousted from her dream world. She was barred entry to the very house she longed to be mistress. The guilt she felt for possibly harming Grady's reputation was dimmed with fear she might never obtain the wealth she craved. Louisa had expected Ashley to be teary and weepy. She believed Ashley would be a weak little city girl that she could easily win Grady. She hadn't thought of Jake. It was easy not to think of him when he wasn't near. She needed time to think.

Ashley poured another cup of tea. She learned a great deal in this conversation both in the spoken and unspoken. Jake had told her the truth. He hadn't left very often. He was pulled back from his pursuits by Louisa's needs. He must have been constantly berated before and more after they moved to Geneva's Hope. After meeting Jake, Ashley realized he was very much in love with his wife. He was trying to become someone she would be proud of. He wanted to be a



good husband and a good father. She felt even better for giving Jake the loan. She felt wonderful that Louisa was barred from her home unless invited. Ashley adored her husband for being so fond of Julia. He would be a wonderful father, but she wouldn't stand for Louisa using Julia to stay close to Grady. Ashley enjoyed another scone with her cup of tea.

Ashley was enjoying her tea and scones when Dora May came into the parlor.

"Do you want me to take the service?" Dora May asked coming close to Ashley. "Are you finished?"

Ashley nodded. She was thinking of how she should approach Grady. She certainly was not going to apologize. Still she didn't want this argument to continue.

"It's none of my business," Dora May said picking up the tray. "Esther came in and told me Louisa is in a real snit. I don't suppose it had anything to do with your tea this morning with her?"

"Actually," Ashley smiled. "I hope it has a lot to do with it."

Dora May left the room chuckling. "Louisa met her match. Woo wee! Grady is in for the time of his life. The lucky man sure picked the right wife."

Ashley returned to the nursery. She wanted to change some things on the sketches. She had a different idea. Once she finished those sketch changes she planned to study the dining room.

Grady arrived before the noon meal. He walked Spirit to the stable and gave him a good grooming. Rouge was already in the stable. When Grady asked where Gus was, the hands told him he was by the west corral studying the new horses that were to be saddle broke for the army. He was glad Gus was occupied elsewhere. He wanted to talk to Ashley alone. Gus was right, but he didn't want Gus in the middle when he faced his young wife.

After grooming Spirit, Grady washed in the horse trough. A clean towel was always kept nearby for the hands to wash the horse smell from their hands. He went to the kitchen. At this time of day Grace would be making the noon meal. Grace would know where Ashley would be. Grace knew what was happening in the house at all times. George was a stuffy uptight butler. He was good for greeting some political guests, but Grady always preferred Grace's home touch. George also needed employment. George's ego would be bruised if



Dora May were the only one bringing in money. Of course Dora May was the dark skinned version of Grace. It was like having two housemothers. Grady would be certain Ashley would be well cared for if he ever found he must leave the ranch for several days.

“Good day, Grady,” Grace welcomed. “Did you have a pleasant ride?”

“Alright. Where is Ashley?” Grady asked. “I need to speak with her.”

Grace looked at Grady with hesitation. She didn’t want to interfere in marital arguments, but she didn’t want another argument in the house. Ashley had a confrontation with Louisa. Ashley didn’t need another confrontation. The stress might be too much for the pregnancy. Some delicate women could lose the baby if put under too much pressure. Grace wanted that little baby born. She wanted to cherish the child as her own grandchild. Louisa had dreams that could hurt, but Grace had her own dreams of raising Grady’s child. How could she delicately ask Grady his purpose? If it were for another argument she would have to interfere.

Grady read Grace quickly. She had heard the argument and was worried there would be another. “You heard the argument?”

Grace beat the batter harder with her spoon with nervousness. “It was hard not to hear it. The walls were vibrating. It’s not a good thing with Ashley’s condition.”

“I’m here to apologize,” Grady assuaged.

“She’s in the dining room sketching,” Grace offered quietly slowing down her mixing. “Ashley is a talented designer and artist. We’ve already sent Sam to Ely for the materials we need. The new cabinetmaker Martin is working on the furniture with some pine lumber we had. Did you know Ashley likes pinewood? The nursery furniture will all be pine.”

Grady hadn’t really listened to Grace. His mind was on his purpose. He left the kitchen to enter the dining room through a walkway-connecting door. Ashley was sitting on the floor sketching on a large paper pad. “Is that okay? I mean sitting on the floor? Will it hurt the baby?”

Ashley looked up. She had spent her time concentrating on decorating the dining room. She hadn’t decided how to approach Grady. “I’m quite comfortable.”



Grady walked to Ashley. He offered his hand to help her up from the floor. "I would like to talk with you. Do you have time?"

Ashley put the charcoal in the napkin. She placed the napkin on the pad and put it in one hand. She took Grady's offered hand. "Yes."

Grady lifted her from the floor and took her charcoal and paper. He placed the paper and charcoal on the table in the hall. He led her up the stairs to their bedroom.

Ashley removed her hand from Grady. She sat on the bed. "I'm ready."

Grady sat next to Ashley. He retrieved her hand once more. He brought it to his lips and brushed her knuckles with a kiss. "Ashley, when a man makes a mistake he is more of a man to admit it. I've made a grievous mistake. I'm sorry."

Ashley was delighted. He was right. A man is more a man if he can admit he was wrong. She had to learn if Grady understood exactly how he had erred. "Are there reasons for this apology?"

"Many! First, I was wrong not to listen or understand your reasons for giving Jake money. Second, I was wrong not to support that decision. Third, I was in error to judge Jake without knowing or discussing his reasons and methods. I listened to hearsay. I did not talk with Jake," Grady apologized. "I am truly sorry, Ashley."

Ashley was satisfied with Grady's apology. It was the time to broach the subject of Louisa. "Are you truly ready to listen, now?"

Grady continued to hold Ashley's hand in his. "I'm ready to listen to every word."

"In the first place, I learned Jake's only dream has been to own a blacksmith shop and livery. He loves the work and he loves the animals. He has tried three times, only three times to find that dream over the past six years. Each time he tried, Louisa pulled him back for some reason or another."

"Louisa?"

"Yes, Louisa has thwarted his dream for selfish reasons of her own," Ashley informed. "Yet she pushes Jake away by berating him constantly and comparing him to you. He's a man that is drowning. He is drowning in love for a woman that doesn't know what she wants."

"Aren't you judging Louisa?" Grady suggested softly. "She appears to be fine woman."



"No," Ashley replied calmly. "There is one thing Louisa thinks she wants."

"What?" Grady asked innocently.

"She wants your wealth, your power, and to be mistress of this ranch."

"That's preposterous."

"You said you would listen."

"But, Ashley. I've never shown Louisa any interest."

"You may think you haven't, but your fondness for Julia has aided Louisa's fantasy. She uses the little girl to show others your interest in her. Did you know she has intimated her new son, Jaygee, is your son?"

Grady's face color paled. "No! I've never seen the boy." Grady was suddenly afraid Ashley might believe he was promiscuous. "Ashley, I have never touched Louisa. You must believe me."

Ashley felt a bit sorry for her husband. This news was a shock to him. "It's alright, Grady. I know you never touched Louisa. I know you are mine alone as I am yours alone," Ashley reassured. "Still if you do the math, you could have bedded Louisa before you left. Other people might believe it if Louisa continues to spread her innuendo."

"I must talk to her," Grady choked. He was shocked.

"Yes, you must," Ashley encouraged. "But you must discuss this with her in the presence of witnesses."

"You're right of course," Grady conceded sadly. He was broken hearted that such things would be suggested. "I thought Julia was a cute as a button. I've always wanted a daughter." Grady palmed Ashley's rounded abdomen. "I want a little girl. I want her to look like her mother and I want to spoil her. I was raised with all brothers. There were no girls in our family. I was told I had an older sister, but she died when she was only a few days old. It broke my father's heart. He always spoke of his baby girl. I always wondered what it would be like to have a sister. I saw my friends with their sisters. They would fight, but they were protective. When I saw Julia, I just wanted to treat her special. I didn't mean for her mother to think I was interested in her. Louisa is a nice woman, but I would never commit adultery. I just wouldn't."

"I know," Ashley assuaged. "There is another matter I want to straighten with you."



Grady sat silently. He waited for Ashley to speak.

"I need your trust, Grady," Ashley requested. "I don't believe anything hurt me more last night than your lack of faith in my ability to gather facts and make decisions."

"And you were correct. You were so accurate I felt like a knife ran through my gut. I never talked to Jake. I only listened to Louisa's complaints when Julia was near. I only heard Louisa's description of Jake being a useless rainbow chaser. I took those descriptions as truth," Grady confessed. "I judged without fact. I judged with hearsay. You were right."

"Apology accepted," Ashley returned with a smile. "We will have disagreements. It is a part of marriage, but let us always discuss the disagreements as we are doing now."

Grady pulled Ashley into his arms. He kissed Ashley's neck and held her tightly. "I agree. This is complete surrender."

Ashley pushed him away playfully. "I love you the way you are. I don't want you to change anything about the wonderful kind loving man you are. We just will disagree on occasion and we need to control our tempers to discuss it."

Grady whispered into Ashley's ear, "You have my promise. When do I talk to Louisa?"

"Soon," Ashley suggested. "We had tea together this morning. I told her I was aware of her intimations. I told her she would no longer be allowed in this house without an invitation. I also told her I would no longer tolerate her innuendos that smear my husband's reputation."

"You did," Grady chuckled. "I know you did. Why is it necessary for me to speak to her? I'm sure you handled it well."

"Louisa still needs to hear it from you," Ashley insisted. "I believe she lives in her dream world of being some type of princess. She has two beautiful children that she needs to be a proper mother for. And she needs to learn to be a good wife. She can't do that until you make her see the futility of her dreams about you."

"I would never have even guessed, she felt that way," Grady said.

"You don't feel that way. You couldn't see it," Ashley excused. She laid her head upon Grady's strong chest.



Grady kept Ashley in his arms for several minutes. It felt good to just hold her. That's all he wanted at the moment. He wanted the comfort of holding his wife.

After several minutes Ashley looked up at Grady. "Darling, I'm very hungry. I can even smell Grace's cooking."

"I guess I'm hungry too," Grady agreed. "Let's eat."



Chapter 18

“Uncle Grady!” Julia hollered. She ran towards Grady as fast as her little feet could carry her. She was holding the porcelain doll Grady had given money to buy for her. “Uncle Grady!”

Grady turned to see Julia running toward him. He stooped, opened his arms, and picked her up when she ran to him. “Hello, Pumpkin.” Grady had spent the rest of the day discussing the new horses with Gus and the ranch hands. They spent the afternoon looking over each horse from nose to hoof.

After Grady had Julia securely in his arms he noticed tears on her cheeks. “What’s the problem, Pumpkin? Do I see tears?”

“Uncle Grady, Mama told me I can’t talk to you no more,” Julia sobbed. She held her doll tightly. “Victoria and me are real sad. We like you.”

“Victoria?”

“Oh, I forgot to introduce you. This is Victoria. She says HI!” Julia explained. She put the porcelain doll’s face on Grady’s cheek and made a kissing sound.

Grady took the doll’s hand and shook it. “I’m pleased to meet you Miss Victoria.”

“Is it true, Uncle Grady?” Julia asked sadly. “I can’t talk to you or see you any more?”

“You’re talking to me right now, Julia,” Grady comforted. “Of course you can talk to me or see me any time you want.”

“But Mama says Miss Ashley would be mean to me. She told me Miss Ashley doesn’t like me,” Julia blurted excitedly.

“That’s not true,” Grady disputed. “Ashley likes you.”

“Would Mama lie to me?” Julia questioned. There was confusion in her little face.

“No, your Mama wouldn’t lie to you,” Grady said gently. “I think you Mama doesn’t understand. Don’t you worry. I’ll talk to your Mama about it soon.”

“I feel better. Miss Victoria feels better too.”



“Good, let’s go to the kitchen and get one of Mrs. Grace’s sugar cookies. Would you like that?” Grady offered.

“Oh yes, yes indeed,” Julia bubbled. She took Grady’s hand when he put her on the ground. Together they walked to the kitchen. “Miss Victoria would like a cookie too.”

“I think that can be arranged,” Grady stated. He realized he would have to talk to Louisa about all of this. He wouldn’t do it right away. Instead he wanted to talk to Ashley about going to Carson City and speaking with Jake first. He wanted to know for himself exactly how Jake felt about Louisa and his children. He wanted to see for himself what Jake was doing in Carson City.

Cougar’s Paw had sent four of his warriors with Grady on his trip to Carson City. They would wait for him outside in a hidden rock area about ten miles from the city. It had only taken Grady five days to reach Carson City from Geneva’s Hope. He really liked that name for the ranch. It fit just right.

Ashley had agreed to the trip. She was anxious for word of Jake’s enterprise. Grady had to once again talk Ashley out of riding with him. Ashley’s pregnancy was becoming more obvious. He didn’t want her to take any risks.

Five miles outside of Carson City on the main road was a blacksmith, livery, and stable. A fine clapboard house was set back from the main road about 100 feet. Grady wondered if this was the place Jake had told Ashley about. If it was, he had to admit Jake was making a good investment. The buildings were well built. It looked like Jake has spent the past month doing repairs on the roof and stable. The yard was clean. The house looked solid. It had glass windows and lace curtains. More importantly the location was on the main trail. This was right where a good business could be found. A woman came from the house and waved to him. She looked as if she were middle aged. A blonde boy about 12 years old came out from behind her. The boy approached Grady.

“Do you need some help, mister?” Todd questioned. “Did your horse throw a shoe?”

Grady dismounted. Holding Spirit’s reins in his hand he approached the boy. “No, Spirit is just fine. I’m looking for a blacksmith by the name of Jake Deptford. Would you know him?”



The boy's face beamed with pride. "Sure do, mister. This is his smithy. I'm Todd Dunbar his helper. That's my maw. She keeps house."

"I'm Grady McGillinen. I'm pleased to meet you, Todd."

"Jake is in the livery. He's got a lot of work to do. It's been real busy," Todd revealed.

Wanda Dunbar had followed her son. She wiped her hands on her apron. "Jake works before sunset and way until past sundown. Hardest workingman I ever did see. Do you know Jake?"

Grady grinned broadly, "Yes. I was hoping to speak to him."

"Follow me," Todd answered. He motioned his arms in a large swoop of his elbow.

Grady followed the boy into a side door of the livery. Grady was amazed at the shop. It had the standard bellows, fire pit, forge, and chimney to the roof. The shop had the bands for wheels and horseshoes, but Grady found forged iron skillets, ornate ironwork for stair banisters, iron towel bars, and other assorted pieces of decoration for the home. Jake was concentrating on repairing a wagon wheel. Grady noticed the wagon in front of the livery. There were five other wagons waiting for repair. He didn't see the entire stable, but it looked like there were at least five horses and two mules in the stalls.

Todd walked up to Jake and pointed to Grady.

Jake acknowledged Todd. He nodded to Grady. Jake yelled over the noise of the bellows and fire, "Mr. McGillinen, I'll be with you in a minute or two. I have to finish this wheel."

Jack finished fitting the iron band on the wheel. He immediately soaked the wheel into the water tub. Steam rose as he spun the wheel around. He checked the wheel several times and from different angles. He was satisfied with his work and put the wheel down flat carefully on a wooden table. Jake washed his hands and dried them in a towel hanging on an iron hook attached to the table. Jake walked toward Grady and extended his hand. "This is a surprise, Mr. McGillinen. I have the money for your loan. I was waiting to pay you until I could go to the ranch and bring my family here."

Grady remained in place until Jake walked to him. He extended his hand as Jake grasped his. Grady admired Jake's strong firm grip. "I'm not here about the loan." He almost said that is between you and Ashley, but he remembered Ashley had explained to him that Jake thought the money loan was from him. "I wanted to



check on the investment.” That was true enough. “I realized we never talked.”

“You’re the boss, Mr. McGillinen. Hands don’t have conversations with the boss. The boss talks to the hands.”

Grady was embarrassed. Was that what his men thought of him? He thought he was more of a friend. That was a shock to his ego. “Call me Grady. As I said, I came to see this investment. It is a sound one.”

“Thank you,” Jake said a tad embarrassed. “I paid cash for it. I invested every penny I’ve saved in my life. I bought some new equipment and the place needed repairs. I’ve worked solid on it for almost two months.”

“Ashley said you need that small amount on a short term,” Grady stated observing Jake. He seemed tense. It was obvious to Grady that Jake was choosing his words carefully.

“I’ve made a tidy profit that would pay for everything. Unfortunately two men didn’t pay. I was caught short for the bank loan I took,” Jake shared nervously. “I would lose everything to the bank unless I swallowed my pride and asked you for help.”

Swallowed his pride? What did that mean? “I don’t understand, Jake.” Grady replied quietly. “I’ve always been there for everyone when they needed help. There is no pride to it.”

Jake had held back his anger far too long. He tried to control it but it still eked out. “Yes, you help everyone. You are the great man. I’ve had to live with that for three years now. You can do no wrong. You’re a success and I am a failure. You have no idea what it is for a husband to listen to this day in and day out. Finally, I have something of my own. I worked for you honestly. It was a day’s pay for a day’s work. I saved every cent. I spent half on my children and my wife for their care,” Jake snapped. “I wanted more for them. I wanted to give them silks, satins, bows, and gee gaws. I’d never do that until I had something real. I couldn’t stand being in your shadow any longer. I never quite met Louisa’s expectations, but my life had been hell after we moved to your ranch. I will never be as rich and powerful as you. I had to make a future and take Louisa away. I love her so much my gut kills me for it. You have no idea what torture it was to ask you for money.”

Grady was shocked. He remained quiet for several moments. “Jake, I had no idea.”



“Didn’t you?” Jake snarled. “You paid Louisa for doing little to nothing. You gave Julia a lot of attention. My daughter adores you. Julia got pretty presents from you. She got sweet candy, pretty dresses, and pretty shoes. Do you know what that does to a man’s pride. Louisa praised you everyday. She put you up like a Greek God, a Savior, and an icon that no one like me would ever be able to match. Why do you think I asked Mrs. McGillinen to let you know not to tell Louisa I borrowed anything from you? If she learned you helped in any part of this, I’d never hear the end of it. I couldn’t live with that. I want my wife and children back.”

Grady sank down to sit on a three-legged stool. His face paled. He didn’t have any idea what he had done. He wondered if all the hands saw him the way Jake did. He thought he was being generous and returning wealth the way he had found it. He was wrong. Perhaps he was too involved in himself to realize what his father had always told him, *‘You must see beyond what you believe and walk in the shoes of those people you make judgment. Our lives are shaped by our experiences. Our experiences are never the same. This is why you must listen, learn, and judge no other.’* “Jake, I never realized this. I am fond of Julia. I was raised with brothers. We had no sister to spoil. I dreamed of having a little sister to pamper when I was little. That dream didn’t quit when I grew into a man. I may have pampered Julia, but I treated her no differently than the other little girls that come and go from Geneva’s Hope.”

“Geneva’s Hope?”

“My wife Ashley named the ranch. It’s a perfect name for my dream,” Grady presented. “You see Jake, I’m a dreamer. I chase rainbows for the pot of gold. You and I are very much alike. I just had an earlier start. Things were bad in Ireland. They got worse. I started earlier is all.”

Jake looked at Grady curiously. “It was a surprise to find out you married when you went east. I have to admit it made me a little happier to know you had married at last. I was beginning to worry that Louisa would want a divorce. I love her. I don’t know what I would have done if you wanted her.”

Grady realized everything Ashley told him was fact. Including Louisa’s fantasy about him and being mistress of the ranch. “I am happily married, Jake. I love my wife as much as you love yours. We’re even having a baby. I’m hoping for a little girl.”



"I noticed that when I spoke to Mrs. McGillinen," Jake chuckled. "I hope your children are as smart and beautiful as mine."

Grady smiled. He noticed Jake had relaxed a little. He would be more careful about certain things from now on. He also had Ashley and her love to help guide him.

"Why don't you go into the house?" Jake suggested. "Jim Mason will be coming for his wagon any minute. I promised I have it done this afternoon."

"Let me help you put it back on the wagon. It'll take less time with two of us working at it," Grady offered. "Let me help. I want to help."

Jake nodded his acceptance.

The wheel was on the wagon securely in less than a half hour. Jake wiped the sweat off his brow by wiping his shirtsleeve. Grady had removed his vest and shirt. His tan darkened more by the sun. Grady did enjoy hard physical work. He also felt he owed Jake. He didn't have any idea what damage Louisa's fantasy had done.

"Jake," Wanda called from the house. "Noon meal is ready. Come and eat. Wash yourselves before you come to the table."

The meal was as good as Grace prepared back at Geneva's Hope. There was sweet cream freshly churned butter, light fluffy biscuits, fresh honey, carrots, potatoes, and lamb that melted in your mouth.

"Mighty fine meal," Grady complimented.

"You are a treasure, Wanda," Jake praised. "I'll go on the porch and have a smoke before I start making the rest of those pans for the mercantile. Todd, you help your mother with the dishes. Then I need you to finish polishing those pans I finished this morning. "I'll be taking those into the mercantile tomorrow."

Todd began clearing the table.

Jake and Grady walked to the parlor and Jake removed a pipe. He offered one to Grady. They went to the porch and shared the bag of tobacco.

Grady pursued his quest for more information. He wanted to understand things more. "Ashley said the proprietor passed on and his widow was selling it."

Jake inhaled his pipe and blew out the smoke. "I heard about it from miners that passed through your ranch. I knew them from Ruth awhile back. They had moved on to Carson City. They knew owning



a livery and smithy was my dream. I had seen the place before and realized it was a gold mine. It hadn't been too profitable because the owner was older and couldn't do the work that needed to be done. He also only did wagon wheels and shod horses. I knew I needed to expand into other iron works like tools, decorative art, and kitchen utensils. I've done pretty well."

"I see that," Grady acknowledged. "Congratulations on your insight to branch out further in other markets. I know you will be successful."

Jake straightened. He was receiving a compliment from the man he disliked. If only Louisa could hear this. All he managed to say was, "Thanks."

"You earned it," Grady praised. "I only saw you as a ranch hand. You were the best for breaking horses. I see now that your future was far beyond only that one talent. I was wondering if I could stay on a little while. You see I love learning new things. I don't mind hard work. I'd like to learn some things from you."

Jake puffed with pride. "I'll work you hard."

"Fair enough," Grady agreed happily. He wouldn't become a smith, but he could learn a lot of things that could be useful in the future.

The two men returned to the smithy and began the hard work of forging new frying pans.

"I sure wish Louisa could see you working for me," Jake commented pouring the hot iron into the stone mold.

"I'll be sure to tell her about my apprenticeship," Grady promised. "It's only one half of a day and I am amazed."

The following day Grady excused himself to ride out to the waiting Shoshone warriors. He sent messages to Ashley, Gus, Grace, Dora May, Cougar's Paw, and his foreman Butch McKinnon.

Ashley read her note carefully. She was very proud of her husband. He was taking a smithy apprenticeship from Jake Deptford. He described Jake's investment as solid and definitely successful. He wrote to her telling her how right she was and how proud he was of her to invest in such a worthwhile enterprise. He would be gone for about two months. It would be September and he wanted to be home with her every moment from then on. He promised her that he could



easily be reached in event of any emergency. All she needed to do was contact Cougar's Paw and he would send his warriors. Grady also instructed Ashley to let it be known around the ranch that he was apprenticing under Jake. He hoped Louisa would hear that and she might again realize how wonderful her husband truly was. He admitted to Ashley how right she was about everything. He wrote that she and Gus were to have complete control of Geneva's Hope finances. All decisions and expenses would go through her and Gus.

"I see the boy came to his senses," Gus crowed walking into the parlor holding his letter from Grady. He smiled broadly at Ashley. "It's you and me, now."

Ashley returned his smile. "I will miss my husband desperately, but I love what he is doing."

"Ah honey, you have me," Gus grinned mischievously. "I'll watch over you and the baby. Besides, Morning Song sent word that she and Eye of Hawk are planning to spend some time here with us. She's bringing Grant back. Turns out, the Brit takes to Shoshone life like a duck to water."

"I heard he is having the time of his life with Cougar's Paw," Ashley agreed. "He's learned to hunt with bow, ride a pony bareback, and track."

The following day Morning Song rode in with Grant Wessex and her son.

Grant walked in wearing full deerskin regalia of a Shoshone warrior.

Ashley expected Grant to wear a smiling face. Instead he wore a frown and seemed quite unhappy. He greeted her with a simple hello and went directly to the room he had used when he first arrived.

"What is the matter with Grant?" Ashley asked Morning Song when she entered the house.

Morning Song quickly ushered Eye of Hawk toward the kitchen to find a treat from Grace. "He spoke to Tells the Truth this morning."

"Who is Tells the Truth?" Ashley queried furrowing her brow. She still had much to learn about Geneva's Hope and its people including the Shoshone that lived in peace on the land.



“He is our camp Shaman. He sees things that others cannot see. He has visions. He called Grant in this morning to tell him of a vision he received.”

“Perhaps it is none of my business, but what did he tell Grant?”

“Tells the Truth told Grant the woman he loves is waiting. Grant asked him how that was possible since his father told him this woman left him to marry someone with a loftier title and more money. Our Shaman said your father lies. It is time to return to your land. The blood born of the love is waiting for him. This connection will be followed until the second son is once again united with this land.”

“It sounds prophetic,” Ashley stated quietly. “Still, it really makes no sense.”

“Our Shaman has never been wrong. Once Grant returns to his England, the truth will be revealed. He will understand,” Morning Song related with conviction.

At dinner Grant announced he was making travel plans to return to England. He once again wore his tailored cut suit.

“Morning Song told me what the Shaman told you,” Ashley presented for conversation. “I’m afraid it makes absolutely no sense to me t’all.” This evening it was only Grant and Morning Song at the small dinner table. Grace, Dora May, and Esther had eaten earlier. Apparently they were given instructions in Grady’s letter to get some things accomplished while he was with Jake Deptford. Ashley believed it had something to do with letting the ranch know that Jake had a highly profitable business and Grady was taking apprenticeship.

“Some of it makes sense to me,” Grant replied angrily. “I came here to forget my Celeste. My father told me she led me on. She was really engaged to a powerful and wealthy Duke. Fool that I am, I believed it since she disappeared so suddenly.”

“You must have loved this Celeste, deeply,” Morning Song stated.

“I still love Celeste with all that I am,” Grant answered somberly. “I must return and find out the truth.”

“Did you really simply believe your father?” Ashley questioned in surprise.

“Yes, fool that I am,” Grant responded. “Celeste simply disappeared from London without a trace. I had spent weeks looking for her to no avail. It was if the earth swallowed her whole. I could



only believe I could not find her because she did not want to be found.”

“Typically a male response,” Ashley chided. “A woman in love with another man simply would not disappear off the face of the earth. She could be found. It has all the logical markings of a conspiracy. Who was Celeste’s father?”

“He is a London merchant.”

“Would he have approved of the marriage?”

Grant shook his head. He believed it to be a mismatch of society station. He disliked me for the noble title.”

“Then logically it would seem your father and her father conspired to separate the two of you,” Ashley deduced. “I have a feeling this time you will find your Celeste and be forever happy. You must bring her here sometime.”

Grant smiled for the first time that day. “I do believe this to be true. You have my promise I will return here and I will bring my Celeste sometime in the future.”



Chapter 19

Grady was worked hard in his blacksmith apprenticeship, but he didn't work as hard as Jake. The new business Jake created brought in along with the regular wagon repair and horse shoes about \$100 a day. That was a great deal of money for one day. Most of the profits came from the ornate ironwork Jake created. Grady concentrated on the physical work of shoeing horses and repairing wagon rims. Todd was learning to make the cast iron frying pans, griddles, and cooking pots.

There was so much work and good profit that Jake made the decision to hire another man. He realized Grady would return to his ranch. Soon he would need the extra help.

The house and livery were completely repaired when Grady determined he would be leaving. It was September and he needed to return to his wife. She would be growing heavily into the last portion of her pregnancy. He wanted to be with her.

Grady was amazed at the luxury Jake spent on making the house comfortable for his wife.

Jake and Grady would travel together to Geneva's Hope. Jake had built a new wagon with a spring design and it had padded seats. He built a canopy over the top to protect Louisa and the children as they rode the wagon. The back was large enough for all their supplies and goods from the cabin. A canvas would cover their belongings. There were canvas rolls on the side they could use as a shelter for the nights they would be camping. Grady had promised he would send several ranch hands with them as escort for their return.

Jake and Grady had put aside all their differences and become fast friends. One of the reasons Jake put aside his jealousy of Grady was because his business was thriving. He would be a wealthy man. Grady shared some insights into investments. Jake would invest a portion of his profits in other businesses in Carson City. Grady also offered him the name, address, and contact of the Investment firm he used in Boston.



Jake and Grady were working outside on a stubborn wagon wheel when three riders passed on the road. One of the riders looked at Grady.

"Damn, it's him," Rufus growled. His hand lowered to his pistol.

Cal looked to the man Rufus was staring at. "I don't believe it. That's the same man that gave me and Bob a run fer with them Injuns."

"If it ain't our lucky day," Rufus crowed. He palmed his pistol.

Cal noticed Rufus touching his gun, "There's riders coming up the trail, Rufus. I'd go easy with the gun of yours."

"Not to worry, Cal," Rufus replied. "I want a face to face showdown, and I want that pretty woman he has."

"Them women is pretty well protected," Bob reminded. "Scared the hee bee Jesus out of me. All those injuns coming out of the bushes like they did. The women sure were pretty though."

"First things first," Rufus ordered pompously. "I need to find out his name and where he's from. Think he owns this place?"

"Don't know," Cal answered. "I know I don't want him to recognize me. Let's get into town. We can ask there."

"Let's go before they notice us," Bob urged nervously. "Those riders are getting close. They might be coming here."

The men agreed silently and reined their horses to head for Carson City. A rancher hired them with a grudge as protection. They would be in Carson City for a while. They'd have plenty of time to work on their own grudge.

"We'll be heading for Grady's ranch tomorrow at dawn, Wanda," Jake informed his housekeeper. "I'm leaving this money with you to take care of paying Jed Hopper while I'm gone, paying any bills that may come up, and any supplies you and Todd might need. I'll be gone for about two weeks. I need you to keep an eye on Jed. He's a good man, but this is all new to him. I trust you to manage while I'm gone. You've been keeping track of the invoices and bills. I'm confident with you here. I hate to go, but I want to bring my Louisa and children home. It's all ready now."

Wanda smiled. That was the most Jake ever said in one breath before. She liked Jake and he was good to her and Todd. She felt



proud he trusted her. "It's about time you bring that wife and children of yours. I can't wait to see the little angel, and I want to spoil that new baby of yours."

Jake grinned broadly. "I'm anxious to hold and spoil my family as well."

"That Grady turned out to be a good man, Jake," Wanda commented wiping her hands. She had just finished kneading several loaves of bread. She was preparing food baskets for the men to take with them on the trip.

"Yeah," Jake agreed. "I resented his success so much I didn't see the man. He's been a big help. I gave him the loan money back, but he wouldn't hear of taking the interest I offered him."

"He'll be a good friend to you," Wanda prophesied.

Jake nodded his agreement. "I have to get back to the smithy. I'm finishing the special order of ironwork for Casper Martin's balustrade."

"Be sure to double charge him the regular price," Wanda ordered. "His special order is twice the work. You've worked well into the night for four weeks on that iron."

"I need to have it done before I leave," Jake reminded. "He wants it the very day I'm expecting to be back from Grady's ranch."

"I know," Wanda sympathized. "I wouldn't care if you did make him wait though. He's the meanest man in all of Carson City."

"He's still got good money," Jake quipped.

Wanda laughed, "And I know how much you want to spoil that wife and family of yours."

Grady and Jake left before dawn. Jake tied his mare to the back of the wagon and drove his new wagon with pride. Grady led the way riding Spirit. It was a relatively easy ride on the main road to his ranch from Carson City, but a longer ride. It would take at almost a week. Grady would also have preferred to ride with his Shoshone friends.

Rufus had met Bob and Cal on the trail to Carson City. It seemed the three had been contacted by Casper Martin to be his bodyguards.

Casper had been in Utah Territory for the past ten years. He had claim jumped several mines to obtain his wealth. He used that



money to take control of many small businesses and ranches until he was one of the wealthiest men near Carson City. He was also a man that made a number of deadly enemies. He had heard about these three men by accounts of drifters coming from Fort Bridger. He sent two of his ranch hands with his offer. The hands came back with the report they were the men he was looking for. They had bad reputations and people were afraid of them.

Casper sat in his tailor made wool suit and stiff collar. He sat behind his desk when Rufus entered with Cal and Bob.

The men had taken the time to bathe and shave, but their clothes were still filthy with trail dust. Their boots were scuffed and worn. Their guns were in holsters that hung just about at the level of their hips.

Rufus was the meanest and he was given the role of leader and negotiator.

“You let word you need to hire guns?” Rufus asked knowing the answer. He wanted this wealthy rancher to know he was no one to be fooled with. He wouldn’t come cheap.

“Sit down,” Casper commanded. He wouldn’t give an inch to the rowdy. He was in charge.

“I’ll stand.”

“Suit yourself,” Casper sneered. “I was looking to hire bodyguards.”

Rufus laughed, “A gun is a gun. We heard you have a lot of enemies. We won’t come cheap.”

Now Casper would have them in his snare. Everything is about money, even loyalty was a matter of being something bought.

“Anyone protecting me will be sufficiently paid. I value my person.”

“So I’ve heard,” Rufus chuckled. “What’s the deal?”

Ashley felt a tingle down her spine. She rose from her chair where she was working on tatting a tablecloth edging. Slowly she walked to the door of the Geneva’s Hope. She continued to stare at the hill roads that led to the ranch. She saw a small cloud of dust in the distance and knew Grady was returning home. She had missed her husband, but held no anger. She knew he needed to spend this time with Jake. He needed to grow from this experience. He would learn a great deal from Jake as a man, not Jake the failure Louisa had made him out to be. She was disappointed that he was gone so long. There



were many nights she felt their baby moving inside of her. She had longed to share the growth and movement of her child with her husband. Ashley called for Grace.

Grace came from the kitchen area. She was wiping her hands on her brown apron. "You called for me. Is anything the matter?"

"Grady is on his way home. He should be here in about an hour," Ashley announced happily. "I'll prepare fresh clothes for him and get everything ready for his bath. I'm certain he would like a brandy first. Can you prepare it for him? Perhaps a small refreshment of fruit and cheese?"

"Are you certain it's him?"

"I'm certain. I just know it," Ashley reassured. She turned to go up the stairs to their room. Quickly Ashley went to Grady's armoire. She retrieved a fresh cotton shirt, clean denim pants, drawers, socks, and a clean pair of boots. Carefully she placed the clothes on the bed. Ashley moved into the bathing room. She removed his favorite juniper scented soap from the chest of drawers. She also retrieved two fresh towels for drying after his bath. Satisfied with her preparations, Ashley returned to the front door to watch for Grady.

The dust cloud was closer. When the cloud was within a half mile of the ranch, Ashley walked to meet Grady. She did not run to greet her husband because she was in the last portion of her second trimester. She was larger in girth and did not wish to accidentally trip in a gopher hole.

Over the rise Grady saw the silhouette of his wife walking toward him. He was thrilled to see Ashley. He felt this was a required penance, and he learned a great deal. Still he missed Ashley's presence as much as a drowning man missed breathing. Grady nudged Spirit into a fast trot until he was near Ashley. Grady slid from Spirit in a smooth motion after Spirit stopped. Ashley was in his arms in a second. Grady buried his face into Ashley's hair. He choked on his emotion. He had missed her so much. Until this moment holding her he hadn't realized how much. Tears slid down his cheeks. What a wonderful wife he had. She didn't chide him for his absence. She didn't cajole him to come home. Instead, she had written to him weekly informing him of everything that was happening at the ranch and reassuring him that everything was well under control. Today on



his return there were no angry words. His wife greeted him with open arms and love in her embrace.

After the embrace and long loving kiss Ashley looked up into Grady's eyes. "Welcome home my darling."

"Thank you," Grady whispered.

"Thank you?"

"For being you."

"You're welcome. And the same to you," Ashley replied. "Is that Jake?" Ashley questioned pointing to the wagon in the distance.

"Yes, Jake built that special wagon," Grady answered. "He's come to take his wife and family to their new home. You were right, Ashley"

"Of course," Ashley grinned. "Right about so many things. Which one do you mean?"

Grady adored his wife's teasing. "Jake has only had one dream and he has worked very hard to bring it to success. Louisa has a beautiful home waiting for her. She even has good help to make it a home for her, Julia, and Jaygee. Jake has made a little heaven on earth for them. I'm sure once Louisa gets there she will be quite happy."

Ashley gave Grady a wide smile. "I have to admit Louisa's leaving will make me happy."

Grady frowned. "She hasn't bothered you."

"No, but she has been less than a pleasant personality to be around since you left," Ashley informed walking with her husband to the ranch house. "She was queen of the ranch while you were here and even while you were in the East finding me. Of course I am grateful to be found. Then you brought me back. She hoped I would hate it and go back East. Unfortunately it became apparent to all that her innuendo about the two of you was only a dream she had. She lost her standing with everyone here. She has been miserable since. After the confrontations she has had to face her reality. Louisa isn't happy here any longer."

"This is the right time for Jake to take her home," Grady said strongly. "I've learned how much he loves her and his children. It was great sacrifices he made for them. Perhaps now, Louisa will return his love in like kind."

"I hope so," Ashley admitted. "But I want to keep you selfishly for a while. I've fresh clothes and a promised bath ready for you. Grace is preparing a wonderful meal for you."



“Ashley,” Grady said and then hesitated. He was choked with emotion. How many times could you tell a woman you loved her and she was your life? “You are my life.”

The dinner was a quiet romantic affair with candles lighting the small family dining area. Grady was comfortable and enjoyed Grace’s culinary skills. There was no mention that even Gus wasn’t there for the meal. This was a time for Ashley and Grady to share.

Jake was thrilled to actually be greeted by Louisa. They began packing the wagon with their belongings. Louisa wasn’t a popular person on the ranch lands, consequently there were few goodbyes to be made. The ranch hands liked Jake and many of them helped load the family’s household onto the wagon. They would leave for Jake’s Livery at first light.

Before Grady and Ashley retired for the evening Gus welcomed Grady home. It was then Grady asked Gus to see to providing six of the hands to escort Jake Deptford and his family to their new home. The rest of the evening was strictly for Grady and Ashley.

The winter months came to Utah territory. Snow blanketed nearly every portion including Casper’s town holdings and ranch. Nothing much was happening and Rufus had some time to start his own investigations. He rode to the livery. Casper’s ranch was only three miles away.

Louisa was in the kitchen working with Wanda making fresh bread. She found she was quite content in her new home. Here she was the mistress of the manor. At first it was difficult with Wanda, but slowly she found her marriage with Jake was indeed a good marriage and Wanda was a good person, not a threat. Wanda’s son Todd was a blessing for Julia. Todd became like a big brother for Julia and Jaygee. Not only did Todd work in the smithy with Jake, he also helped with the chores and taking care of the children. Yes, Louisa did find a sense of happiness at last. Louisa was looking out the window when she saw the stranger ride toward the smithy shop. When the snows came in November travel on the roads was reduced dramatically to only a few travelers a month. Louisa assumed the rider would go on by, but was surprised when he turned into the path leading to the livery.



Jake was busy fitting runners on a sled for a Carson City family. He didn't hear or see the rider. Todd was busy polishing more frying pans for the mercantile. A lot of the money and profit came from those pans. The mercantile sold as many as Todd and Jake could make.

Rufus looked toward the house and saw a beautiful woman watching him. Rufus was always interested in beautiful women. She wasn't the woman that was with the man outside of Saint Louis, but she was beautiful. He would just have to make an introduction.

"He's coming to the house," Louisa shared with Wanda. She called Wanda to look over her shoulder at the rider.

"That brings an ill wind. A lone rider would go to the livery first," Wanda commented. "You go fetch Jaygee and take Julia with you. I'll answer the door."

Rufus shook off the snow from his boots on the steps and knocked on the door.

Wanda came to the door and opened it only partially. "Can I help you?"

"Excuse me ma'am, I thought I saw someone else in the window," Rufus mentioned tipping his hat.

"Is there something you need?" Wanda questioned ignoring his question.

"Well ma'am, it is a cold ride up here and I was hoping for a cup of hot coffee," Rufus said quietly. Inside he was raging. He wanted a good look at the pretty young woman, not this older plain woman.

"You have business, here?" Wanda demanded keeping the door partially closed.

"Well, I was hoping to talk to the smithy. I rode into town sometime ago and thought I recognized him. Thought I might check on it now it's quiet at the Silver Pine Ranch.

"You work for Casper Martin," Wanda stated sourly. There were only a few people that ever spoke to Casper Martin. He was cruel and selfish. He walked all over people to get what he wanted. Some people believe he was behind certain accidents leaving him to buy property from widows.

"Yes'm, I'm one of his hands," Rufus responded. He was trying not to lose his temper. "I'm mighty cold, ma'am. Is your man around so I can talk to him?"



"He's in the livery," Wanda answered as cold as the weather. She wasn't about to invite the man in. He worked for Casper Martin and that man usually hired the scum of the earth. Wanda would never come out whenever Casper Martin came to do business. She never wanted anyone to see the miracles Jake had performed with this house.

Rufus turned and walked toward the livery. He wasn't happy about being treated so rudely. Most of all he wanted to look at the woman he saw looking out the window.

Todd looked up when the stranger walked into the smithy. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Yeah, where's the smithy?" Rufus asked rudely. He was still angry he didn't get to see the pretty woman and he was cold.

Jake came from behind the billows. "I'm here. What do you need sir?" He didn't care what anyone looked like when they came into his smith shop. He treated everyone with respect until they changed his mind.

Rufus frowned. "You the smithy?"

"Yes."

"I saw a large sandy brown haired man that looked similar to you, he your brother?"

It was Jake's turn to frown. "When did you see this man?"

"It was about September, when I first came to town. I couldn't stop. This was my first chance," Rufus answered attempting to sound as casual as possible.

"That was Grady McGillinen," Jake responded. "He was here about that time. Grady returned to his ranch. Do you know him?" Jake would have been surprised if Rufus was a friend of Grady. Generally Grady stayed away from types like Rufus. It was obvious he was a hired gun. "You work near here?"

"I'm a hired hand for Casper Martin," Rufus bragged. "You heard of him? I hear he sends a lot of work your way."

Jake knew he had to be careful. He couldn't afford any affront to Casper Martin. It was true Martin sent a lot of business his way. It was top profit business. "He does indeed."

"Good, tell me where this ranch of Grady McGillinen is," Rufus demanded.

Jake was well aware that the ranch was a fortress and protected by at least twenty to thirty ranch hands. That didn't count the



Shoshone. It was also a long ride in the winter months. “It’s a ranch near Ely from what I know.”

“Thanks,” Rufus said irritably. He was angry. Nothing about this visit turned out. He had hoped this Grady would be here and he would kill him quickly. The man deserved to die for killing his companions and putting the rest in jail. He was also freezing cold. “You got any coffee here? I’m purty cold.”

Jake always kept a heated pot on the small furnace in the smithy. There were many nights he worked late and the coffee helped to stay warm and keep awake. “Todd get the man a mug of coffee, would you please?” Jake turned to Rufus. “Excuse me, I have to get back to my work or those runners won’t fit the sled properly.”

Rufus nodded and waited for Todd to bring him the mug of coffee.

Todd brought the hot brew to Rufus. “Here you are sir.” Jake had taught him to be polite regardless of the customer.

“Thanks kid,” Rufus said. He was hoping he might get more information from the boy. “You know this Grady McGillinen?”

Todd had been listening to Jake answer Rufus’s questions. He knew Jake well enough to know that Rufus was not a man to openly give information. “I know he worked here awhile and went back to his ranch near Ely. That’s about all.”

Rufus drank his coffee and left. This visit was disappointing, but at least he had a name and a location.



Chapter 20

“Yes, I know of a Grady McGillinen,” Casper responded to the question. “Do you have an interest in him?”

“Yeah, I got a personal interest in the man,” Rufus replied cautiously. He knew Casper was a snake and untrustworthy. It took one to know one. He had been back from his visit to the smithy for a day when he received a summons from Casper. Grudgingly he rode into Carson City from the ranch. It was really cold and he really wanted to find out information from the hands. He thought some of them would know of this Grady McGillinen of Ely. Unfortunately the ones he asked didn’t know anything. He wouldn’t have guessed that Casper and Grady hired polar opposites for ranch hands. He felt he had nothing to lose in asking Casper. He asked before Casper gave him the reason for summoning him.

“McGillinen has the largest ranch this side of the Mormon holdings. He bought up a lot of dead mines to enlarge his spread,” Casper elucidated. “I’ve not dealt with the man, only heard of him. I heard he’s some sort of Injun lover.”

Rufus frowned. His hatred increased two fold. An Injun loving greenhorn had bested him. He had enjoyed being the boss of the gang. It was the first time in his life he was somebody. Grady McGillinen had changed all that. Rufus remembered most of his gang was now in prison and two of his gang was dead.

“McGillinen’s ranch is outside of Ely. It’s a long ride from here in the winter,” Casper commented. “You planning on visiting?”

“Not until spring will I make my visit,” Rufus answered. He had the information he wanted. He needed to change the subject quickly before Casper became too curious. “You called me for something?”

“Yes, I’m planning to visit a friend just south of here, if you catch my meaning,” Casper replied. “I want you and Cal to accompany me.”



Rufus knew exactly what Casper meant. He needed to threaten a local rancher into doing something Casper wanted. Rufus didn't mind throwing fear into the locals. It made him feel superior. He liked this job when Casper used him. "Just name the day."

Ashley held her newborn son in her arms. She was exhausted from the full day of labors to bring him into the world. At the bedside were Morning Song, Grace, and Dora May. The three women were beaming proudly at the little newborn.

"He's beautiful," Grace sighed. She had helped deliver Grady's son. "I think we should take him downstairs to his father, Ashley. Grady must be worried silly by now."

Ashley reluctantly gave up her swaddled son. She was tired and Grady would want to see his little boy. "Grady had hoped for a little girl, I hope he isn't too disappointed."

Morning Song laughed. "He has already forgotten his hope. All that is on his mind is that his wife is doing well. This is a promise to you, Ashley."

Ashley watched Grace take her son out of the room. Dora May had already left with the sheets to soak and wash them. She had used the back stairs knowing Grady was waiting in the parlor. The blood would have frightened him. Men didn't know about birthing even though they helped deliver foals and calves. Somewhere in their minds a child's birth was sterile clean.

"Morning Song," Ashley called through her exhaustion. "You have become such a wonderful friend to me. I feel like we are sisters."

"We are sisters of our hearts," Morning Song responded sitting on the side of the bed.

"Somehow I feel as though you will be there for my children, even if I could not," Ashley informed. She felt elated, but a bit maudlin.

"Our lives will be entwined," Morning Song stated prophetically. "You must rest. Soon your son will be hungry. Your sleep time is most precious."

Ashley closed her eyes. The winter winds whistling in a strong storm lulled her to a sound sleep.

Grady left the parlor and once again looked up at the stairs. To his joy, this time he watched Grace descend the staircase holding a



small bundle in her arms. His breath left his lungs. His child was born. It seemed it was hours ago when he thought he heard the cries of a newborn.

Grace walked to Grady. She couldn't help the radiant smile on her lips. Grady was like a son to her. This child would be a grandson she had always hoped for.

Grady stepped up to Grace and took the soft woolen blanket from her arms. He cradled the bundle and then moved the blanket corner to the side. It was then he saw his child. A sense of pride, hope, and elation filled Grady's heart.

"You have a son," Grace informed sensing Grady's first question. She answered his second question before he looked up from his child. "Ashley is doing well. She's sleeping."

"When can I see her?" Grady questioned. He was still staring at his son.

"In a few hours," Grace promised. "I'll wake her for the supper meal."

"I won't wake her," Grady reflected. "I don't understand why I can't just look at her."

"There is no reason you can't look in," Grace conceded. "Just don't wake her. Let me take the boy."

"If it's alright, I'd like to hold him awhile," Grady requested pulling the baby a little tighter in his arms."

Grace smiled. "Of course you can hold him."

Gus came from the parlor. He was frowning with worry until he saw Grady holding the bundle. "Let me see!" Gus demanded. He looked to Grace, "Ashley doing well?"

"She's fine. She's sleeping. Grady has a son."

"Let me see the little tyke," Gus repeated.

Grady showed off his son with pride. "He's cute."

"Wrinkled little fella," Gus snorted. "I guess he'll press out with age."

"He's been in a tiny cramped position for nine months," Grace snorted. "He just got out. He'll fill out just fine."

Grady and Gus laughed heartily. Grady walked up the stairs with Gus behind him. He quietly opened the door to their room finding Morning Song sitting on Ashley's bedside.



Morning Song turned to see Grady and Gus peeking around the door. She put her finger to her lips and gestured with her other hand for them to enter.

Grady sat on the other side of the bed still holding his son. He leaned over and kissed Ashley's brow. "Thank you," he whispered. He turned to Morning Song. "Ashley's truly fine?"

Morning Song nodded. "Do you wish me to take the baby?"

Grady shook his head in the negative. He stood up and walked to the large chair in the bedroom he used many times since the ranch had been built. With his son cradled in his arms he opened the soft woolen blanket and looked his son over completely. He raised the baby dress and counted his toes looking at every one of them. Grady lifted each finger and gently held each one of them. He smiled broadly when the boy opened his eyes and appeared to be looking back at his father. The little one moved restlessly for a few minutes, closed his eyes, and went back to a contented sleep. Grady was overwhelmed. He wasn't certain what he was going to do about being a father during Ashley's pregnancy. Grady holding his new son in his arms knew exactly what being a father was all about. He would provide, protect, and set an example. He couldn't help but think of his own father and what he must have felt when he held each one of his boys after they were born. Grady was the youngest of the McGillinen boys. He wondered if it was the same miracle feeling each time. Carefully he recovered his son and simply stared at the sleeping baby in his arms. He thought about naming the boy. Ashley had wanted to call the baby, Augustus if it was a boy after Gus. Grady knew Gus would not like that at all. If there was one thing Grady knew about Gus was he hated his name. His father named him for a great Roman Caesar. His peers plagued him as a child for his name. Gus was happy when he went off into the navy and became simply Gus. He had kept the moniker.

Grady's thoughts again went to his father. He had written letters and had received two in return. His father and mother had died in the famine. His brothers survived, but were scattered from the homeland with the exception of his eldest brother, Patrick, who still lived on the farm he managed. It was then he decided his son would be named after his paternal grandfather, Ayden. He would give his son his wife's family name, Stuart, and then give him a third name, Gus. He knew Ashley would approve.



“Little Ayden, so small and perfect,” Grady whispered. “Do you like your name? Your name comes from your Grandpapa.”

Morning Song turned from her sentry at the bedside of Ashley and smiled at Grady. She and Cougar’s Paw knew he was a good man. Every day and in every way he proved it.

Dora May came into the room and told Grady that Grace had prepared the supper meal. He was to come and eat.

Grady finally surrendered his new son to the cradle. He would talk to Ashley in the morning. He hoped she would like the name he picked.

The blizzard winds continued to howl outside Geneva’s Hope uncaring of the birth of the American McGillinen family clan. Snowdrifts covered the paths to the stables and barns. The ranch hands spanned ropes from one building to another. This rope allowed the ranch hands wearing snowshoes to traverse the distance from building to building and do the chores.

The snowshoes were only one of many useful items the Shoshone had shown the ranch hands to survive the harsh winters of Utah territory.

After supper Grady bundled up and put on his snowshoes. He followed the ropes to the stables. There he helped the hands pitch hay to the sheltered horses. They spent the rest of the evening loading hay bundles onto the sleighs that would be taken to the cattle when the weather cleared. The stock had all been moved to ranges closer to the ranch before any winter snows began to fall. The stock was also put on ranges that offered tree copses or bluffs for protection from such blizzards that were hammering the ranch this day.

After the work was completed, Grady was exhausted. He removed his winter clothes and dragged his body to the guest room. He managed to remove his boots and most of his clothes before he collapsed onto the bed and fell sound asleep.

Grace came into the room to check on Grady. She covered his body with an extra quilt and lit the fire adding a large oak log to burn through the night.

Ashley woke to the gentle nudging of Morning Song. Her eyes focused on her Shoshone friend holding her new baby.

“Has Grady seen his son?” Ashley questioned sitting up on the bed.



“Yes, he is most pleased,” Morning Song related cuddling the new baby. She had already bathed the newborn in scented oils and put clean clothes on the boy. He was wrapped in a soft yellow woolen blanket. “You must learn to feed him.”

“Do you think I can?” Ashley questioned doubtfully.

Morning Song just smiled and handed the baby to Ashley.

Grady entered after the baby had been fed. Ashley had buttoned her nightgown and was holding her contented son.

Ashley looked up at her husband and gave him a loving smile.

Grady took a seat on the side of the bed. His finger lovingly stroked his son’s cheek. “Our son.”

“Are you terribly disappointed?” Ashley questioned. “You wanted a little girl.”

“I wanted only a healthy child and for you to recover quickly,” Grady replied. “Are you well?”

“I don’t think I could feel any better,” Ashley beamed. “I’m so happy. I want to write my mother and sisters. I know it will be a time before we can send it, but I want to share his birth.”

Grady rose from the bed. He walked to the secretary table in the room and pulled out paper, quill pen, ink, and a hard wood piece for writing upon. He laid them carefully on the bedside and opened his arms for his son. “I’ll hold Ayden while you write.”

“Ayden? You’ve named our son?”

“I’ve thought of nothing since he was born, Ayden is my father’s name. I thought we would name him, Ayden Stuart Gus McGillinen. It’s a hefty name, but he’ll be a smart one with all the blood and love he’s inherited,” Grady explained “Is it approved?”

Ashley allowed her tears of joy to slip down her cheeks. How wonderful her husband was to include her family’s name and of course honoring Gus? “It suits well.” She hoped her father would be proud a grandson would have his name. Ashley reached for the wood, paper, ink and quill. She watched her husband rocking their son. The happiness filling her heart was written in words to her family.

Spring arrived bringing new life to the land. Ayden had grown in five short months. He resembled his mother in facial features, but his coloring was definitely McGillinen with sandy brown hair and the gray haunting eyes of his father.



Everything was fulfilling and happy on Geneva's Hope land. Ashley became closer to Morning Song in friendship. They would spend many hours riding together or staying in each other's homes. Ashley learned the way of the Shoshone and Morning Song became more comfortable with American lifestyle. Grady and Cougar's Paw spent as much time together exchanging ways of husbandry and cultivation with the Shoshone way of balancing in nature. Gus settled back and enjoyed a type of retirement. He spent lazy days just watching the ranch prosper and his namesake grow. Gus often took the five month old and placed Ayden in front of him as he rode a horse around the corral. Everything was perfect harmony.

Ashley was surprised when wagons appeared at the ranch. All of her belongings from Boston arrived. Everything had been packed and secured for the long journey. The personal articles had been securely stored in St. Louis for the winter. When the warm spring weather allowed it, they continued on their journey.

Ashley felt like a child at Christmas when she unpacked her beautiful clothes, ribbons, and shoes. She had her cedar hope chest filled with the Irish linens. To her surprise a set of fine porcelain china service for 20 was included. Her parents surprised with a gift of two dozen rose bushes for planting.

"How did this all happen?" Ashley bubbled in the middle of all her prize possessions from Boston.

Grady raised a brow. "I smell a Gus."

Max barked an agreement and his trusting face looked up at his master holding the growing Ayden.

"Could be," Gus confessed.

"I love you, Gus," Ashley laughed merrily.

A week later another set of wagons appeared on the road. There were several wagons filled high and covered with tarp. As they entered the path to Geneva's Hope Ranch Ashley spotted a fancy carriage in the middle. She had been expecting the furniture she ordered to arrive, but the fancy carriage was a surprise. She looked for her husband. He and Gus holding Ayden were walking toward the wagons. Ashley ran to Grady. "Did you order that carriage?"

"Yes, I did." Grady replied simply.



"It's lovely, but what on earth for? It isn't really practical for ranch use," Ashley commented.

"It's practical for important passengers," Grady chuckled. "Perhaps someone like my wife and children for a visit into town?"

"Gus is already teaching Ayden to ride bareback, and we have beautiful horses to ride," Ashley said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Morning Song and I visit each other on horseback as I recall. You haven't let me even visit Ely since my arrival."

"Perhaps I was waiting for the proper conveyance for a most proper lady, or ladies," Grady stated grinning broadly.

"You are silly," Ashley chided. She turned to Gus who was also grinning. "Do you know how frustrating it is for a mother to vie for time holding her son? Do you ever put Ayden down? I haven't noticed."

"Yep, when he sleeps," Gus laughed. "He's my first grandson. I like the little feller."

"Gus takes good care of our son," Grady assured. "Come on, Sweetheart. Let's look at the carriage." He took Ashley's arm. Together they walked to the carriage stopping in front of the ranch house.

Ashley couldn't help but notice the mischievous gleam in Grady's eye. "What are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding a thing," Grady answered holding back a wide smile. "Everything is open and up front."

It was at that moment the carriage door opened. One of the ranch hands assisted a beautiful middle-aged woman leave the carriage.

Ashley stopped and stood as a statue. "Momma?"

A middle-aged man dressed in Eastern clothes and a top hat followed.

"Papa?"

The man turned and helped another younger woman.

"Alyson?"

The group from the carriage looked around and then at the ranch house.

Margaret Stuart spotted her daughter standing still. She ran toward her daughter with open arms.



Ashley responded instantly. In seconds she was in her mother's arms. Alyson followed and the three women were hugging with tears of joy streaming down their cheeks.

Margaret was the first to hold Ashley at arm's length and look at her. We received a letter from you and then Grady informing us we were to become grandparents. Where is my grandchild?"

"Over there with Gus," Ashley laughed. "I barely get to hold my son at all. Gus monopolizes his time from daybreak to sunset."

"The old coot will have to share while I am here," Margaret said stubbornly. "Gus, bring that child over here this instance."

Gus obliged. "Good to see you again, lovely lady." He attempted to give Ayden to his grandmother.

Ayden would have nothing to do with leaving the security of Gus's arms for these strange women. His chubby little hands clung to Gus's clothes and buried his head into Gus's neck collar.

Margaret did not attempt to take her grandson. She knew to a little baby she was a strange person. Instead she touched his little body and spoke softly. "He looks like you, but has Grady's hair and eye color. He's a cutie, darling. I'm so happy. What is his name?"

Ashley beamed, "His name is Ayden Stuart Gus McGillinen. He's a darling. He is of course shy."

"Of course," Margaret agreed. "Once our strangeness wears off, it will be alright."

Harold hadn't moved from the carriage. He was staring at the ranch house.

Margaret took Harold's hand. "What is it dear?" She had never known her husband to stay in one place very long unless it was to study his ledgers.

"They live here?"

"That's my understanding. It is a large home. It is much larger than I thought. I really didn't believe all that furniture was ordered for the ranch. I was certain it was for others, but this furniture wouldn't fill the entire house," Margaret marveled.

"Come Mama and Papa," Ashley bubbled. "I want to show you the ranch house. This furniture should finish out most of the house; there is still so much to do. Grady still wants to add on to it. Isn't the home grand?"

"The furniture must have cost a fortune," Margaret commented.



“Yes, it did,” Ashley replied.

“Just how rich is this Grady of yours?” Harold questioned walking arm in arm with his daughter.

“Very rich, Papa,” Ashley bragged. “It takes two days to cross our ranch on any side. Grady has beef cattle, milk cows, sheep, horses, and that doesn’t include his investments. We also have pigs, chickens, and gardens that are filled with both flowers and vegetables. We really want for little, all of us.”

“All of us?” Harold asked raising a brow.

“Oh yes, behind the ranch is a small village, much like your estates in England. We all work together and prosper. A little further west is the Shoshone camp. We work together learning their ways and they learn ours. It is so heavenly, Papa,” Ashley boasted. “I’m so proud to share it with you, Mama, and Alyson. I’m sorry Audrey couldn’t make it.”

“Audrey is in Europe with Henry checking on overseas investments for your father,” Margaret responded. “He will also be checking on the estates.”

“Is little Robert with her?” Ashley asked excitedly. She was so proud and happy for her older sister.

“Audrey adores her son and won’t be separated from him for a moment,” Margaret stated happily. “He’s such a dear. Henry is a proud and doting father. He can’t bear to be separated from his son either.”



Chapter 21

They stood in the main hall.

Harold observed the decorated hall and the large circular staircase. "God's Teeth! You'd never believe this was a log home on the outside. Inside it looks like a manor!"

Grady came up behind Ashley and put his arms around her. "My wife has excellent taste and a wonderful decorating talent."

"I am impressed. I feared my daughter would end up in a hovel and die too young of laborious work," Harold confessed. "I agreed to this trip thinking I would take her back with me and liberate from a life of toil and destitution."

"There is little toil in my life. The most difficult problem I have is trying to raise my son with a doting father and spoiling uncle monopolizing his time," Ashley said happily hugging her husband.

"And now you have a grandfather to help with that problem. I will spoil my new grandson as soon as he gets over his shyness," Harold vowed.

"And a grandmother to spoil our new little darling," Margaret added. "Ashley, I do believe more problems have just begun."

"Damn the man," Casper swore heatedly. "I wanted that horseflesh. McGillinen's money and name are a stone upon my neck."

Rufus perked up when his boss entered the room cursing the name of his sworn enemy. Rufus had been called from his room at the Carson City Hotel.

Casper sat down on his leather chair behind the large oak desk in his office. "I know you got something against Grady McGillinen. I never bothered to ask what and frankly I don't care. This time McGillinen has pushed me too far. I wanted that Morgan from the fair. I had no idea he sent his ranch foreman to buy the winning racehorse with more money than God! He's done this to me time and time again. This time I've put up with his uppity self-righteousness for the last time. Did you know he bought his first land rights from



under my nose? I wanted Ruby Valley and lost it. Then he puts them stinking injuns on it. I overlooked it and built my empire in Carson City. This time I want revenge. I want that horse anyway I can get it. Do you think you and the boys can handle it?"

Rufus considered the other hands. Some were like him and others were like Bob and Cal, drifters that played at being a gunslinger. "Some of the boys," Rufus replied. "I already have an idea working."

Casper lit a cigar. "Take care of it. I get that horseflesh and you get \$500 to split with the men you pick." That was the last Casper said of it. He hired men to do jobs and they did them.

Joe Green had been the ranch foreman of Grady's ranch for a year. He liked Grady and the ranch. He felt he finally had a place to call home. Joe was riding down the trail with the Morgan he bought for the ranch under Grady's orders to purchase the winning horse of the Carson City Fair horse race. He didn't have a worry or care in the world when he felt a hot piercing pain in his back. He instinctively grabbed his chest and felt the warm blood pumping out of his heart. He slumped on his horse and fell to the ground.

Rufus had planned this back shooting for a reason. He would take Joe's body to Grady's ranch. With a forceful slap he would send the horse toward the ranch house and with the body they would find incriminating evidence that would lead Grady to Carson City. He would be waiting outside the ranch when Grady would ride to Carson city. Rufus didn't need to have any other of the hands conspire with him. He did it alone. The money would be his. He often used ambush to his advantage. The revenge on Grady McGillinen would also be an ambush. He had it planned.

Rufus cinched his horse and checked his pack once more. Joe's body was tied to the horse he had been riding. Rufus tugged on the reins of Joe's horse and the Morgan. He began his trip to find the McGillinen ranch near Ely. After Grady was gone the Morgan would be found by Rufus near Carson City. No one would suspect him of having anything to do with Joe and Grady's murder. Hell, they could suspect him, but who would prove anything.

Ashley, Alyson and their mother spent the next week putting the furniture in their proper place and adding the decorative carpets,



doilies, drapes, and paintings. The ranch was turning into a comfortable yet stylish manor house. Inside one had the feeling of being in a fashionable neighborhood in Boston. The three women with Grace and Dora May enjoyed themselves. Grace and Dora May offered delicate embroidery pillows for the divan cushions. During the winter months they had created the designs to occupy time during the snowstorms. Little could be done other than sew, knit, or embroider.

Harold Stuart spent most of the time with Grady. He was quite interested in how he ran the ranch and the cooperative village near the back of the ranch. Harold also had a keen interest in horseflesh. The three men including Gus would spend several days exchanging information on the breeding plans and the resulting foals. Grady shared with Harold his breeding of Arabian blood with the mustang for endurance and speed. He also had high breeds used for selling to the Army and Thoroughbreds for the Army officers.

Ashley insisted Ayden be kept with the women and Gus reluctantly agreed. Margaret had finally conquered Ayden's shyness and did become the doting grandmother.

"So young, and Ayden knows how to play his Grandmamma," Ashley quipped.

"And he does it so very well," Margaret laughed happily cuddling a sleeping Ayden in her arms.

Grady consented to his wife, her sister, and mother in law a trip into Ely for sightseeing and shopping. It wasn't much of a town yet, but it was growing rapidly. Mormon farmers had settled in south of the town. They were sent by the Mormon Church to hold land against the government of the United States. The more land under Mormon control the less likely the United States would get control, or so Brigham Young thought.

Gus would ride to town with the women, mainly because he wanted more time with Ayden. They would take a guard of six ranch hands.

Morning Song would also accompany the women to the town. She would bring ten warriors as escort. Cougar's Paw would never allow any harm to come to his wife and mother of his son, Eye of Hawk. The warriors would remain hidden from open view, but would be protecting her.

Tempers and greed were flaring across the land and the Shoshone often ended up as innocent victims.



Harold had been enthralled with the ranch and its lands. He spent most of the day with his new son in law, Grady. They were far from fast friends, but shared a common love of land and husbandry. Harold would announce he learned something new every day. Harold felt much younger and healthier in this land of fresh air and open country. He was still hesitant around the Shoshone, but some beliefs were harder to break.

The sun cast its warmth on lush green ranch lands. Ashley and Morning Song rode their horses. Morning Song had conceded to riding sidesaddle and wore an English riding habit. It was times like this Morning Song would pass as a white woman unless closely scrutinized. It was safer to travel into town with her disguise. Few people knew Morning Song was the daughter of an English trapper and a Shoshone woman. Her father had raised her in the white world near Saint Joseph after her mother died of winter lung fever.

Dora May rode in the buck wagon with Gus and Pete, her two children sat in the back playing cat in the cradle. Margaret and Dora May sat in the carriage. Margaret was holding a sleeping Ayden. The trip to town was a big event.

Rufus had been riding the main road to the ranch from Ely when he spotted the dust approaching him from the north. He quickly took the horses into a heavily wooded copse where he wouldn't be seen. Or so he thought.

The Shoshone escorts had spotted him and watched him pull off the road. They watched the man closely when he hid. Such actions from a white man indicated the man was up to no good. The Shoshone were interested in a man that rode a sturdy mustang, reined a magnificent horse, and had a large blanketed bundle roped on the top of a skittish mustang. One Shoshone guard was ordered to follow the white man.

Harold and Grady had ridden out to the north forty to check on beef cattle that had been moved there for grazing. Grady had profited from a large number of calving beef cattle. He would be selling nearly 500 head to the army in Fort Bridger at a substantial profit. Harold was always interested in substantial profit.

The Shoshone followed the white man to just outside Geneva's Hope. Cones Falling watched curiously as the man released the ropes of the bundle horse and slapped the burdened mustang hard to send it



running toward the ranch. The horse continued in a run until it walked slowly to the barn. It was obvious to Cones Falling that the horse was one of Grady's ranch horses. He then watched the man rein in his horse and return the way he came. Cones Falling continued to follow the white man to just outside of Ely where he met the other Shoshone warriors. He reported everything he had seen. None of the Shoshone understood the strange behavior.

Rufus walked his horse and the Morgan to the Ely livery. He passed the carriage and wagons. There he saw her. That beautiful woman he and his gang wanted in Saint Louis. Yes, he had found Grady at last. When he finished his business killing Grady and settling with Casper, he would find her and make her his woman. She looked different now. She looked aristocratic and all. He would use her well and then turn her over to one of those fancy places in New Orleans. Things were looking up for him. He had already picked out his ambush place for Grady south of Ely. Grady would follow the main road to Carson City at least until the mountains might give him a faster ride. Rufus was certain Grady would ride alone or with only one or two men.

Grady and Harold had spent a pleasant day riding the lands of Geneva's Hope. They arrived at the Ranch house early afternoon and were greeted by several serious faced ranch hands.

Mike took the horses by the reins and led them to the barn. Arnie was selected to talk to the boss about Joe Green.

"What is it Arnie?" Grady questioned watching Mike lead the horses into the barn. The somber faces of the ranch hands surrounding him concerned him.

"It's Joe Green, the foreman. He was back shot," Arnie said responded sharply. He liked Joe. All the ranch hands liked Joe. Good men responded with rage when a friend was cut down by back shot.

Grady tensed in concern. Joe Green was the best foreman he had since he started with a one-room log cabin on this land. He feared Arnie's answer.

"He's dead!"

"I sent him to Carson City to buy the winner of the fair race. How do you know he's dead and back shot?"



Gritting his teeth to control his rage, Arnie answered slowly. "Whoever the polecat was sent Joe's body back to us on his horse just six hours ago. Joe's been dead awhile. He was back shot."

The anger his men were feeling surged through Grady.

Harold noted the change in his son in law. Until now he had only seen Grady as a quiet Irishman with an even temper and kind word for everyone. Before him stood an Irishman black with rage.

"Let me see him," Grady demanded.

"It ain't pretty," Arnie answered walking toward the barn. "We found this stuffed in the blanket. It's the fair circular announcing the county race. A note was written on the back."

Grady read the note. 'Pay back for you. If you want me, come alone back to Carson City.' He crumpled the note and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Seems to me it's a trap to get you alone," Arnie stated noting Grady putting the crumpled paper in his pocket.

"Obviously a trap for another back shot," Grady growled.

They walked to the barn. Inside four hands were cutting and nailing a pine coffin for Joe. They had placed his body on a blanket near the coffin.

Grady lifted the blanket and nearly lost his lunch. It was obvious by the decomposition that Joe had been dead for several days. The exit hole in his chest was huge. It was a rifle back shot. Grady rose to his full height and thanked the men for taking care of Joe's body. He turned on his heels and stormed out of the barn. Arnie was on his heels. "If he sent Joe's horse in about six hours ago he must still be around somewhere near here."

"You ain't planning to go after him alone are you?" Arnie protested. "He's a back shooter!"

"He wants me alone, he'll get me alone." Grady roared storming to a saddled horse near the barn. "Arnie, send word to Cougar's Paw. Tell him to send Fire Storm after me. Tell him what happened and that I need a friend to watch my back. I'll stop only at Ely to purchase some grub. It will give Fire Storm time to catch up with me."

"Aye, I see your plan. A Shoshone can follow without being seen," Arnie agreed. "I'll saddle up and get to Cougar's Paw right away."



Grady rode hard once he left the ranch. He ran into the women and Gus returning from Ely.

"What the Sam Hill is your hurry, boy?" Gus grumped seeing the sweated mustang. He noted it wasn't even Grady's horse.

"Joe Green is dead, Gus. He's been murdered. Get the women home. The hands will tell you everything," Grady ordered. "Gus, see to it that Joe gets a proper burial."

Gus growled in anger, "You think you can catch the polecat alone?"

"The polecat requested it," Grady returned angrily. "I'm only obliging. I've sent for Fire Storm."

Ashley was delighted to see her husband and reined her horse up to Grady. "What is it, Grady?" she asked seeing his face. She had only seen this look when something was very wrong. It was like the time they ran into the criminals outside of Saint Louis and the two men she and Morning Song ran into outside of Utah territory.

"I need to take care of something," Grady replied tersely. "I'll be gone for a week or two. Go back to the ranch with Gus." He nudged his horse and took off in a run toward Ely.

Ashley was terrified. Something was really wrong. She just knew it. Her husband was riding into danger. She felt it. "Gus?"

"Listen to the man, Ashley. We're going home."

A few minutes later found Harold riding past Margaret, Ashley, and the rest of the group. He was following Grady hoping to catch him. Harold didn't stop.

Margaret was frantic with worry. Deep in her bones she felt both Harold and Grady were in great danger.

Grace retrieved the crying Ayden from Margaret.

Margaret immediately loomed out the window of the carriage screaming at her husband to return. He was simply too old to ride that hard and to what danger she did not know.

By the time the entourage arrived at the ranch the Ashley and Margaret were in hysterics. It had taken Gus grabbing Ashley's reins and refusing to release her until they were at the ranch and a hand assisted her down from the horse at Gus's orders.

"I'm going after Grady," Ashley cried angrily stomping her foot on the ground.



“You are going to stay here and take care of Ayden,” Gus countered forcibly. “We have no idea what is going on and I will lock you in your room if necessary.”

Morning Song had already dismounted. She talked to the hand that assisted her dismount to find out what happened. She held her back rigidly walking quickly to the ranch house. She would change into her calfskin dress and ride bareback to Cougar’s Paw. She too had felt the air of danger when Grady and Harold had ridden past them. Although she had been informed that Arnie had gone to Cougar’s Paw for Fire Storm, she knew instinctively that more warriors would be needed. Morning Song disappeared before anyone realized she was among the missing.

Gus carried out his threat to lock Ashley in her room. She would remain there the rest of the night allowing her temper to calm down. Margaret was tended too by her calmer daughter Alyson. Ayden was taken to his mother and locked in the room with her.

Gus saw to it that Joe Green received his proper burial the next day. He acted as reverend and holding the bible read quotes and said prayers over the grave.

In the early afternoon Gus opened the door to Ashley’s rooms.

“The prisoner is released? No food, no water,” Ashley groused.

“Ashley, you had fresh water. If you would have been trustworthy, Grace and you would have had food,” Gus decreed. “It’s safe now. You’d never catch Grady even if you tried.”

“Where is he going? What happened?” Ashley demanded loudly forgetting her young son was sleeping nearby in his crib.

Ayden immediately awoke screaming with fright at the tone of his mother’s voice.

Ashley was instantly contrite. She ran to her son, picked him up and comforted him. “Very well, Gus. I do have Ayden to care for,” she said quietly. “What has happened?”

Gus sat next to Ashley on the bed and lovingly patted Ayden’s little back. “Joe Green was murdered. He had been back shot. A written note was on his body telling Grady to ride to Carson City for a showdown.”

Ashley gulped hard. “A trap. Grady is riding right into it.”



"Yes, Grady knows it, but he isn't a fool. You know that Ashley," Gus reminded. "Before he left he sent to Cougar's Paw for Fire Storm."

"The tracker," Ashley remembered.

"Fire Storm can track and not be seen. He will protect Grady's back."

"And what of my father?" Ashley queried in concern. "He's too old for this."

"Humph," Gus grumbled. "I'm not too old and I'm older than your papa."

"Papa is soft, you're not," Ashley reputed.

"I don't think your Papa is that soft. Besides, I couldn't stop him. I can only hope he couldn't find Grady and will come home."

"I am so worried, Gus."

"I am too, little one. I am too."

Ashley had just walked into the parlor holding Ayden. She planned to spend the rest of the day with her mother cutting the material for the drapes and finishing the decorating of the parlor. Ashley thought it was best to stay busy. She was determined to stay busy so she couldn't think.

George announced a visitor. Behind the stoic butler was a tall barrel chested man wearing range clothes and looking like he had been on the trail a long time. "This is Kent Ewal, madams."

"Ma'ams," Kent addressed bowing his head as if he were addressing English nobility.

"Please, take a seat. I'll get you some lemonade," Ashley greeted.

"No thank you, ma'am," Kent appreciated. "I had some water outside. I'm on the trail of a brigand. I heard you had a murder here. I heard it was a back shoot. It sounds like my man. I had just stopped here for water when I was told of it."

"Then how can we assist you?" Ashley asked.

"My horse is plumb tuckered, ma'am. I was told your husband is riding into an ambush. I'd like to give chase ma'am, but I need a new horse. I was told to ask the lady of the ranch or a Gus?"

"You may pick any horse," Ashley said quickly. "Bring my husband home safely, or catch that fiend."

"Cute child," Kent commented. He nodded and took his leave.



Ashley still felt fear for her husband and father, but knew Kent would somehow be a part of this drama. She pulled Ayden closer to her bosom and kissed his soft sandy brown hair.



Chapter 22

Harold had caught up to Grady in Ely. Together they bought new horses to exchange during a hard ride to Carson City. They also bought staples for camping out. Grady had tried to talk Harold into returning to the ranch, but Harold was a stubborn Englishman. Harold could never stand by when a horrible deed had been done. He had seen the body of Joe Green and heard how he died. Harold's blood boiled. He had to find the bastard that did such a foul deed. He would not let his son in law face this alone.

Grady and Harold left before dawn.

"We'll follow the road until the foothills. I want to ride overland after that. We'll cut off at least twenty some miles," Grady shared with Harold.

"Just lead the way," Harold said riding hard with Grady.

Rufus was already awake and waiting just north of the foothill roads. It was the perfect place for an ambush.

Rufus wasn't the only one that knew that. Fire Storm had followed Grady and Harold to Ely. He camped outside of Ely and began his tracking of unusual signs under the light of the moon. Fire Storm had been told of a man riding with two horses on a rein. One of the horses had a bundle. Fire Storm looked for the sign of a rider and a rider less horse. He found it and followed it. Before the dawn light, Fire Storm had found the camp of such a man. He hid in the treed hills above him. Fire Storm knew the man was watching for riders to come from the city of Ely. Of course Fire Storm could not know the man's intentions, but because the man stayed under cover, Fire Storm did also.

Rufus watched as Grady and Harold turn off to the path on the foothills. He readied his rifle and took his shot. He took the other. Rufus brought both men down and ran to his horse. He went in for the kill.



Fire Storm only had his bow and arrow. He did not have time to aim to bring down the man. He could only hope Grady had not been wounded too badly, but he would bring down the man that shot him. He rose slowly and took aim.

Grady had been shot in the shoulder and was awake. Harold had been creased in the head and was unconscious.

Rufus rode up to the men and walked to Grady. He raised his pistol and laughed. "Glad you're alive Grady McGillinen. Look at the face of the man that finally got you. Remember me?"

"I know you. You are a low-bellied snake. Joe Green did nothing to you. A back shooter is the lowest of life," Grady hissed.

"And this low bellied snake survived you and is getting his sweet revenge." Those words barely left Rufus's mouth when an arrow protruded from the front of his chest. "Shit!" Rufus wheezed. "It's them Shoshone Indians. I should have known they'd be near you." Another arrow swooshed in the air and lodged in his gun arm. The pistol dropped to the ground. Rufus panicked and jumped on his horse. He took off in a run.

Fire Storm had a choice. He could chase the white man, or aid Grady, who was crawling to the unconscious man. Fire Storm chose to aid Grady McGillinen. He rode his pony down the hillside.

"Fire Storm," Grady acknowledged. "Harold Stuart, head wound, not bad." Grady managed to say before he passed out.

Fire Storm immediately tore off Grady's jacket, vest, and shirt. He took the shirt and padded it. He took the padding and applied it to the shoulder to stop the bleeding. When it slowed he looked at the old man. Fire Storm took his parfleche and applied poultice to the wound.

While the two men were unconscious Fire Storm walked to the trees. Taking his hatchet he cut down slender limbs and began building two travois litters. Both men needed attention. He could only do so much for them out here. When he finished one travois he looked to find several Shoshone warriors riding to meet him. In the center of the warriors was a white man he had never seen before.

The Shoshone quickly finished his travois and built another. They placed Harold and Grady on the travois, covered them with blankets and tied them to the travois for the journey to Ely.



Grady once again gained consciousness. He recognized the Shoshone, but not the white man. "Who are you?" he addressed weakly.

"I am Kent Ewal, bounty hunter. I speak some Shoshone and when I met them I learned they were looking for you and a man I believe I'm chasing for bounty. He's a known back shooter and wanted for just about everything including murder back in Saint Louis."

"He's the man alright. He tried to ambush us in Saint Louis. The sidewinder got me this time," Grady wheezed.

"Thought as much," Kent replied. "Save your strength. I asked this here Fire Storm if he'd help me track Rufus."

"Easy to track. He is wounded in arm and chest with an arrow," Fire Storm informed. "His blood drops like a road to him."

"How'd he get wounded?" Kent chuckled.

Fire Storm grinned. "Stupid man stood in the way of my arrows."

"Though as much," Kent roared in laughter. He placed his hand on Grady's good shoulder. "I'll bring him back."

Grady placed his hand on Kent Ewal's hand. "Somehow I know you will."

At that moment Harold regained consciousness. He saw the Shoshone and sputtered angrily. "Take your hands off me. Who are you?" He looked for Grady. "Bloody Hell, are we captives?"

"These are Shoshone from the ranch, Harold. They're helping us. If not for them, you and I would already be dead," Grady stated coughing heavily.

"I'll try to believe you, but I'm not comfortable tied up like this," Harold grumped.

Kent walked to Harold Stuart. "They are taking the two of you to Ely to see the doctor there. You'll be fine."

Harold eyed the man cautiously. "Who, the Bloody Hell, are you?"

"A bounty hunter going to get the man that shot you," Kent chuckled. "Rest easy old man."

"Old man?" Harold sputtered angrily. His head soon began to throb. It ended his anger quickly as his world began to spin once again.



The Shoshone rode slowly pulling the travois litters into Ely. They were a spectacle for all the citizens. The Shoshone seldom came into town. A crowd gathered around them when they stopped at the doctor's office.

Melvin Bath had only recently arrived in Ely to practice medicine. He had tired of the demands and the filth of the Eastern large cities. He moved to Ely following the Mormon trail. This was a small clean town he wanted to settle in. "What happened?" he asked coming out from his office seeing the large crowd around the Shoshone and travois litters.

"Gun shot," Small Hill answered in fluent American English. "Cougar's Paw sent us to find Grady McGillinen. He and his father in law were ambushed just south of Ely."

"Who shot them?" Melvin questioned skeptically. He wondered if it was the Shoshone that had ambushed them, but why bring them into Ely?

"The man who back shot and killed Joe Green," Small Hill explained. "That men sent a note with Joe's body to find him in Carson City. He was planning an ambush for Grady McGillinen."

Melvin was already examining Harold while Small Hill gave his explanations. "Whoever applied this poultice did a good job. The wound isn't too serious, but there might be danger of a concussion."

Harold shouted in pain while the doctor checked his wound.

"Give him a good shot of whiskey and take him to the hotel. I'll keep an eye on him later." Melvin started checking Grady's wound. "This is more serious. Take him up to my office. I'll examine the wound and clean it."

The Shoshone released the ropes from the horse and carried the travois litter into the office. The travois allowed for little disturbing of the wound. They laid the litter flat on the table.

Dr. Bath poured a glass of whiskey into a glass. He picked up Grady's head. "Drink this. I don't have any laudanum or morphine yet. I need to probe the wound and clean it."

"I've been shot before," Grady answered drinking the liquid slowly. He knew it would help deaden the pain if he drank enough on an empty stomach.

Dr. Bath cleaned the wound thoroughly. It was a clean wound through his shoulder. He didn't have to pull a bullet out, but he



removed all the foreign matter from it, stitched it, and bandaged it. During the probing of the wound, Grady had passed out again.

The Shoshone had stayed with Grady and held him still as the doctor probed the wound.

The wound was bad enough for Dr. Bath to keep Grady in the office on the spare bed. The Shoshone moved him there after Grady had been bandaged.

"I heard Mr. McGillinen was married. You should go and tell his wife. She may want to bring a wagon. In a few days she can take him home," Dr. Bath told the Shoshone. The doctor had been really surprised at the medical care the men had received. He was also astounded at the fluency of American English of the Shoshone. These certainly weren't the naked savages he had heard about back east. If asked, he would have said the Shoshone were damned civilized.

Small Hill remained with Grady sitting near the bed. Another of the Shoshone had remained with Harold Stuart. The rest left for Geneva's Hope to return to Cougar's Paw and inform Ashley McGillinen of her husband's condition and location.

Fire Storm was correct. A blind man could have followed Rufus and his trail of blood. Rufus had almost passed out from blood loss at a small stream where he stopped to drink water.

Kent arrested Rufus easily. He expected a gunfight. Instead Rufus was barely conscious when Kent put on the handcuffs.

Rufus screamed when Kent pulled his arm back to attach the handcuff. The pain was from the arrows still lodged in his shoulder and wrist.

Fire Storm pushed the arrows through with little mercy. When Rufus blacked out, Fire Storm treated the wounds by cauterizing the wounds, pressing the skin together, putting salve and poultice over the wounds, and then bandaging the wounds. When Rufus finally woke up, Fire Storm fed him a strong beef broth to give him strength for the trip.

The next morning, Kent and Fire Storm tied Rufus to his horse. Rufus's hands were tied to the saddle horn and his feet were tied together under the horse's belly. Fire Storm led the magnificent thoroughbred as the men made their way back to Ely. Rufus was not doing well, although he had eaten, he was weak. He had lost a lot of blood and the shock of cauterization required rest and medical care.



Rufus would be put in the Ely jail and watched there by Kent Ewal. Rufus had a bounty of \$200.00 in Saint Louis and he was determined to collect. He would keep Rufus alive and well to hang in Saint Louis.

Gus met the rider several hundred yards before the ranch home. He recognized Prairie Squirrel riding toward the ranch by his remarkable colored pony. Gus greeted Prairie Squirrel warmly.

"I bring you news of Grady McGillinen," Prairie Squirrel reported in Shoshone language. "He is recovering in a white medicine man's room in your town of Ely. This back shooter had ambushed Grady and the older man, Ashley's father."

"What of the older man?" Gus queried worriedly.

"The old man suffers little. His wound was not as great. Grady was wounded badly. He will recover, but is weak and in danger still," Prairie Squirrel informed. "The medicine man said to bring the wife of Grady to the town. She can help care for him as he recovers."

"I'll bring her. Thank you for coming to us," Gus appreciated. "You are tired. You should return to your camp and rest."

"A little ride as this?" Prairie Squirrel laughed. "I could ride yet for many more days. I love our camp, but there are times I enjoy riding free in the open range. It is like soaring as an eagle in flight among the clouds. It is good to ride and help our friend. Call me whenever you need our help. You and Grady are good men." Prairie Squirrel mounted his pony and left the ranch.

Gus walked slowly to the ranch house. He wanted to think carefully about exactly what he would tell Ashley and Margaret. He found George in the hall and asked him where Ashley and Margaret were.

"They be in the dining room finishing the drapes, suh. Little Ayden be with them," George answered. "Did you hear about the Massah?"

"Yes, George. He has been wounded. Can you get Grace and Dora May to pack some things for us? We'll be leaving for Ely soon. Have some hands prepare the carriage as well as a buckboard."

"I'll see to it right away, suh," George replied. He walked toward the kitchen knowing Grace and Dora May were preparing the noon meal.

"Mother of God," Grace cried upon the news. "I'll go upstairs and pack everything they'll need for several days in Ely. Dora May,



serve the noon meal when it is ready. I need some time to pack things they will need.”

Gus walked into the dining room. “Ashley. Margaret. I have news about Harold and Grady.”

Gus’s grim face terrified Ashley. Margaret sank to the nearest chair.

“Is he...dead?” Ashley choked out.

Gus shook his head in the negative.

“What?” Margaret whispered.

“Grady and Harold were ambushed. They were shot. Both men are in Ely. We’re going there in a little bit. I’ve made the preparations.”

“Do you know how badly they were hurt?” Ashley cried grasping Gus’s arm.

“The facts aren’t clear. The message was to bring you and Margaret. Prairie Squirrel said Harold’s injury wasn’t too bad. Grady is being taken care of by a doctor in Ely,” Gus related calmly. Inside he was boiling with rage. Grady had fallen into a trap and was shot. He wanted to find the vermin. He would shoot off one toe at a time until the vermin was toeless. There were several things he wanted to do the low life.

“He was shot,” Ashley said knowing without being told.

Gus nodded. He walked over to Ayden’s cradle and picked up the baby. He held the sleeping baby close to him. “We’ll eat first. The carriage is being readied. Grace is packing things for the two of you and little Ayden. Dora May will pack us a light meal for later.”

Although Dora May served a tasty meal, everyone ate little.

Ashley had been dressed in a simple calico housedress. She chose to remain wearing it. Margaret changed from a silk to a simple calico she had purchased the other day in Ely. Ayden was changed and wrapped warmly in a large woolen blanket. His head was covered with a warm woolen hat his mother had knitted for him.

The carriage was brought to the front of the ranch. Word had spread amongst the ranch hands. They knew their boss had been ambushed and was wounded. Ten of the hands were mounted and armed to be escorts for the women and Grady’s son. A crowd of people had surrounded the carriage and the ranch home. Several of the women and children ran to Ashley and gave her their love and hope.



Ashley was moved by the love she felt. Her fears were calmed with the love she shared with Geneva's Hope family. Ashley fought the tears threatening to run down her cheek as she said thank you to all the people for their support. Once in the carriage she took possession of her son from Gus as he handed the baby boy to her. Ayden was fussy as if he sensed the tension. Margaret held a stiff upper lip but was fighting her emotions of fear for her husband. Alyson once again remained calm by emitting a serene aura of strength. Alyson always had seemed to be the rock of calm and reason in the Stuart family.

The ride to Ely seemed to take an eternity. The carriage stopped at the hotel. Gus wanted to make arrangements to stay there. He knew it would be a few days before it would be safe to move Grady to the ranch.

The women stayed in the carriage waiting for Gus to make the arrangements.

To everyone's surprise Gus walked out with Harold Stuart. His head was bandaged but he was walking next to Gus without assistance.

"Mamma," Ashley wheezed. "It's Papa."

Margaret snapped her head quickly to look out the carriage window facing the hotel. In a second Margaret had leaped from the carriage and ran to the hotel steps. In the next second Margaret was embracing Harold. She soaked Harold's proper suit jacket with her tears. Margaret kissed her husband on his cheeks, lips, and eyes. Her hands enveloped the bandage with great gentleness. "My darling, you're wounded. Should you be up? Should you be walking? What does the doctor say? What happened? Oh my darling husband. I love you. I would be lost without you."

Harold returned his wife's embrace. He kissed the top of her bonnet. "Dear Margaret, you're making a scene. You might give someone the impression you love your husband."

Margaret pulled back and looked at Harold. "I just might give the impression because I do love you." She kissed him on the cheek and then swatted him on the shoulder. "You stubborn fool! You could have been killed. You are a Lord of the English realm and a knight of the kingdom, but you are not a western gunslinger! If you got yourself killed I would never forgive you. I forbid you to go chasing after criminals ever again!"



Gus stood on the side and started laughing. "I guess you've been properly tongue lashed, my lord!"

Ashley and Alyson emerged from the carriage. Alyson ran to her father and hugged him. "Oh Papa, we've been so worried. Should you be out of bed?"

Harold hugged Alyson and looked to Ashley.

Ashley was holding Ayden close to her bosom. Her eyes showed the strain of worry for her husband.

Harold held Margaret in his right arm and took Alyson in his left arm. He walked to Ashley. "I was just going with Gus to check on Grady. We'll go together."

The doctor's office was about a tenth of a mile from the hotel. The office was in the back of a building belonging to tonsorial shop. Gus was at the office first and knocked on the door.

Small Hill was up and about to leave when he heard the knock at the door. He opened it to face Gus.

Ashley pushed pass Gus and Small Hill. She had heard Grady's voice. The voice was raspy. She located the sound of the voice quickly. Her husband was lying on a featherbed in a small room behind the main examining room. A heavy fabric acted as a curtain door.

Still holding their son in her arms, Ashley knelt next to the bed. Grady was talking a strange language she believed to be his secret language of Gaelic. He seemed to be living a nightmare of some sort. When she placed her hand over his she felt the fever. Her husband was hot to the touch.

Small Hill took Gus to the side and spoke to him in Shoshone. "Grady is crazy with fever. I thought it would burn itself out in the night, but it grows worse. I will go to the woods and bring the bark of the tree. I will grind it into a powder to help his fever. The cool cloths are not enough. I will return in a short time. The medicine man has gone for his breakfast. He will return soon."

Gus knew of the tree bark Small Hill was referring. "Go quickly, Small Hill."

Ayden started to cry and Alyson retrieved her nephew.

Ashley went pale in terror. "He's burning up! Small Hill was cooling him with damp cloth. He's rambling. He's dying!"

Gus came immediately to Ashley. "He has a fever, Ashley. It happens after gunshot wounds. He's not dying. Small Hill has



knowledge of Shoshone medicine. If Grady were dying Small Hill would have told me.”

“We have to do something!” Ashley cried.

“Gus, get some fresh well water. Make certain it is cool,” Margaret ordered. Confident now that her husband was well, she could keep a calm head and assist her daughter with her husband.

Harold walked out the door with Gus to help him with buckets of fresh cold water.

Ashley sat on the bed and took the hot cloth from Grady’s head and put it in the bowl Small Hill had been using. The water was beginning to warm, but it was still cooler than the hot cloth she removed from his head.

Margaret found more cloths. She used the bowl of water to dampen the cloths and began to gently wipe Grady’s arms and hands. The bandage on Grady’s chest was showing evidence of where the wound was and would need changing. Margaret noticed the stain did not show any bright red blood and it was not growing in size. The doctor apparently had stopped the blood flow, but Grady’s pale face showed he had suffered a blood loss.

Gus and Harold returned with buckets of cold well water.

Ashley and Margaret refreshed their cloths with the cool water and began wiping Grady.

Grady was incoherent and moving erratically, but his body did not seem quite as hot.



Chapter 23

The sight of his son in law visibly shook Harold moving restlessly on the cot and speaking the Gaelic tongue. He wanted his daughter back in Massachusetts with him, but he didn't want Grady to die. He didn't want his daughter to suffer that pain just for him to have Ashley and his new grandson.

Gus whispered to Harold, "You take your Alyson and my little Ayden back to the hotel. You should still get your rest, and the baby doesn't need to be here."

Harold agreed readily. "The boy will live?"

"We'll do everything we can," Gus vowed. He didn't want to even think about losing Grady to a back shooter. They had been through violent and close scares, but nothing like this had ever happened. He loved Grady as a son and it was just wrong to lose a child. He convinced himself everything would work out. Small Hill was good with medicine and would have told him if Grady was in real danger.

Doctor Bath returned to find Ashley and Margaret ministering Grady's heated body. Gus stood watch. "Mrs. McGillinen?"

Ashley turned to see the doctor standing inside the small curtained room. "Yes, I'm Mrs. McGillinen." Ashley turned to face the doctor but did not move from her husband's side or her ministrations.

"I'm Doctor Bath."

"Doctor, my husband has a high fever," Ashley informed. She was shaking in worry and fear.

Dr. Bath walked to Ashley's side. He knelt and felt Grady's skin. Slowly he opened one of Grady's eyelids and looked into the pupil. Releasing the eyelid he took Grady's wrist and checked the pulse.

"Doctor?" Ashley questioned. "Will he live?"



"In the fever he still shows proper eye movement. His pulse is slow but strong. Fevers usually do occur after this type of traumatic wound. It will depend on Grady's constitution, how high his fever climbs, and how long the fever lasts," Dr. Bath explained calmly. "I checked and applied fresh bandage to the wound before I went to lunch. The bleeding had stopped and the wound does give appearance of healing. I can assure you the bullet missed vital organs and even the bone. It went through only muscle. Luckily the back shooter was a poor shot."

"Lucky? My husband is a wonderful, good, and kind man. He never deserved to be shot in the back. Whoever did this is a wicked and evil animal," Ashley sobbed near hysteria.

Margaret dropped her cloths and took Ashley into her arms. At last Ashley cried. She cried and sobbed for several minutes.

Dr. Bath allowed Ashley that time. He went closer to Grady and listened to his breathing through the rambling of Gaelic.

Grady's ramblings changed to American. "Ashley! Ashley, I love you. I love you. You are my life."

Ashley stopped her sobbing and knelt by Grady's side. She took his warm hand in hers. "I love you too, my husband. Come back to me."

Grady responded within the phantoms of his pain and nightmare. He heard Ashley's voice calling for him as if from another world. He fought to wake from his dreams. He wanted to reach his Ashley. He managed to come to a semi conscious state. He forced his eyelids to open a little. It seemed to be a strain for the first time in his life to wake. In forced concentration he forced out Ashley's name through his throat.

Ashley heard the difference in his voice immediately. She put her face near Grady's and noticed his eyes were open slightly. "My darling. I am here. I am here, wake up for me."

Dr. Bath was next to Ashley instantly. "That's it Grady, wake up. Try to wake up. Keep talking Mrs. McGillinen. I do believe he hears you."

"I'm hot," Grady uttered with all the strength he had.

Ashley encouraged her husband more. "Don't try to talk my darling. Concentrate on waking up."

Grady tried to wake up. It was so hard to wake. His eyes felt as if they were lead. His throat burned for water. He was tired. He



was so very tired. He wanted to see Ashley. He fought to wake up even though the pain was coming through with intensity.

"That's it, Grady," Dr. Bath encouraged. "Wake up. The pain is bad, but if you wake up I can give you some liquid. It will help."

Minutes dragged to hours as Grady stayed between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Small Hill entered the room with a pouch in his hand. "I have the paste of the tree bark." He mixed the paste in a small cup of water.

"Here, what are you doing?" Dr. Bath demanded.

"Medicine for the fever," Small Hill replied lifting Grady's head to drink the bitter liquid.

"I don't give permission to give my patient this brew," Dr. Bath objected. "How do I know what it is?"

"It's tree bark paste mixed in water," Gus answered for Small Hill. "Ease up, doc. What can a little tree bark in water hurt?"

"That's just it, I don't know what it is," Dr. Bath complained.

"A little Shoshone medicine couldn't hurt," Gus argued. "You might be surprised to find out if it helps."

"Laudanum will ease the pain," Dr. Bath informed pompously.

"That we know, doc," Gus responded. "First we have to bring down this fever. I've seen the tree bark paste work to do jest that."

"We'll see," Dr. Bath stated. "We'll just see if it does work. How long does this witches brew take to work?"

"It ain't witches brew, doc," Gus snapped. "This is Shoshone medicine. You should see Grady's fever come down in an hour."

Ashley listened to the argument and covered her fear of allowing the Shoshone to give her husband such a brew. Gus seemed to think it would work. Ashley prayed for the concoction to work.

For the next hour Margaret and Ashley continued to wipe the cool cloths on Grady's body. The brew was working. Grady's eyes opened wider. His temperature came down.

With great effort Grady raised his hand and touched Ashley's cheek. "My Love."

Ashley pressed Grady's cooler hand to her cheek and moved her face until her lips were touching Grady's fingertips. Ashley kissed Grady's fingers. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Ashley, my love," Grady croaked.

Dr. Bath felt Grady's forehead. "His fever has come down."

"Tolt ya so," Gus crowed.



Small Hill gave Dr. Bath his pouch. "Keep this and learn. Grady will recover quickly. He is a strong man. I am finished here." With those words Small Hill spoke Shoshone to Gus and left.

"Where is Small Hill going?" Ashley asked Gus quietly. She still held Grady's hand.

"He's going back to Cougar's Paw Camp," Gus replied. "He is going to let the camp know that Grady will be alright."

"Grady is out of the woods," Dr. Bath announced. "We'll give him a little water to drink and then I'll put some laudanum in the next drink. It will relieve the pain and allow him to sleep comfortably to heal."

"Should he sleep?" Ashley questioned. "We've been trying to wake him!"

"There is a difference between a healing sleep and a fever induced coma," Doctor Bath explained. "A healing sleep the body wants and needs. The fever induced coma can be a killer."

"Ashley, honey," Grady wheezed. His throat felt like he lived in the badlands for a week burning in the sun without water. "Where am I?"

Ashley returned her attention to her husband. "Try not to talk. I'll explain everything to the best of my knowledge. You are in Dr. Bath's infirmary in the town of Ely. You were back shot. Shoshone found you and brought you here."

Grady closed his eyes and slowly he remembered. He remembered getting shot and then seeing Harold fall. Things were fuzzy, but he remembered the face of the man that shot him. He was preparing to die. He couldn't be dead. He hurt too much to be dead. His Ashley was near to him. No he couldn't be dead. He remembered Cougar's Paw's cousin, Fire Storm. He was there. Fire Storm shot arrows into that criminal from St. Louis. Harold? How was Harold? In the haze of his vision he saw Margaret with Ashley. "Harold?"

"He's fine," Ashley reassured. "Papa received a minor head wound and is recovering." Ashley applied a cloth soaked in cold water. "Sip the moisture from the cloth. Just a little. It will help your thirst."

Grady sucked on the cloth. The cool liquid went to his dry mouth and parched throat. The water was delicious. "Whiskey," Grady uttered after a fill of water.



“Later, you can have some,” Dr. Bath replied. “Just drink a little water at a time. Keep the water down and we’ll see about getting you some good whiskey.”

Hours went by. Grady would drink a little water, sleep, then drink water and sleep again.

Margaret returned to the hotel for supper, care of her husband, and sleep. Ashley remained at Grady’s bedside. She refused any food, even though Gus had brought a tray of food. Sometime during the deep of night, Ashley slept. Her head was resting on the cot frame and her body was on the floor.

Grady woke during that time. His fever was considerably lower. He was feeling a great deal of pain, but at last he was regaining his lucidity. He focused on his wife sleeping on the cot. Slowly he lifted his arm and placed his fingers on her hair. Grady sighed. He was alive. He felt the pain and the silkiness of his wife’s hair. He was glad to be alive. There was so much to do. He had to buy more land. He had to protect the land from the savage raping mining companies, the irresponsible farmers, settlers, and cowpunchers. He had to build a place that was a Legacy for the children he and his Ashley would create. How often had he and Gus fought the evil of men like the back shooter? He had to live and see to it that Joe Green’s murderer was brought to justice. He couldn’t allow the slime of the earth to win over the goodness of men like his foreman. He wanted to create a paradise on earth on his Geneva’s Hope. He wanted a place of beauty and tranquility to raise his family and love his wife.

Grady’s hand moving through her hair woke Ashley. “My love, are you thirsty?”

“Very thirsty,” Grady answered. He watched his wife get a ladle of fresh cold water for him. He had started the legacy of his Geneva’s Hope. His wife and his first-born son were the beginning. He knew he would survive. He and Ashley would continue to carve this little paradise on earth. Grady wondered if this incident of his shooting and the death of Joe Green would sour his wife. He had to ask.

Ashley brought the ladle and held it to Grady’s lips.

Grady sipped the water greedily. “Ashley, how do you feel about living here?” he asked after drinking his full of the water.

Ashley sat on the cot still holding the ladle. “What you are really asking is, do I want to return to Boston? Do I want to return to a



more civilized society? Do I want to leave a wild place where innocent people are shot in the back?"

Grady couldn't help but chuckle even though it hurt. "I am asking that, but don't hold back on your thoughts."

Ashley returned Grady's chuckle with a warm smile. "Darling, everything depends on a person's point of view. There is violence everywhere. Murders happen every day back in the civilized East. Dangers? I was nearly killed by a runaway wagon in Boston. You rescued me from death."

Grady reached for Ashley's hand. "I was afraid all these things might be too much more for you."

"Then you need to develop more faith in me and our marriage," Ashley chided. "I am madly in love with you. I will be grateful for every moment we have together. I cannot worry for every minute where our life might change. I will only cherish this time we share. I will build marvelous memories for every moment we share."

Grady realized the full impact of his wife's statements. He knew Ashley was his soul mate. She was the woman to help build his dream. "There will be many times we will face the greed of men."

"That doesn't change no matter where you live," Ashley countered. "You needn't worry that I will turn coward and run away. In this short time I have learned to love Geneva's Hope. I will help build our haven for our joy and our children's legacy."

"Thank you," Grady responded. "You are my life."

"Rest," Ashley ordered. "Do you think you can try to eat something?"

"I could probably eat half a cow," Grady teased. "I am that hungry."

Dr. Bath walked in on the conversation. "I wouldn't advise you to attempt consuming that great of volume. It would be best you start with a lighter breakfast."

"I'll take anything you offer," Grady stated.

"I see you are improving already. I always like to see a recovering patient," Dr. Bath commented. "I'll go to the restaurant and order a breakfast for you. When you've finished eating I'll check your wound and change your bandages. Mrs. McGillinen, since your husband is on the mend, I suggest you go to the hotel, eat a solid breakfast, bathe, and then take a long sleep. Those are doctor's orders."



"I should stay and..."

"You won't be much help if you exhaust yourself," Dr. Bath reprimanded. "Doctor's orders. Go now!"

"Go Ashley," Grady encouraged. "I promise I'll sleep most of the day away. I seem to be tired already."

Ashley kissed Grady on his cheek. Her hand stroked the rough stubble on his face. "Tomorrow, if you are feeling better, I will give you a shave."

"All the better to kiss you, my dear," Grady teased wearily.

Together Doctor Bath and Ashley left the small room and out the door of the small office into the street. There was a large crowd forming around several horses coming down the street heading toward them.

"I wonder what the Sam Hill is going on now," Dr. Bath sighed. "Excuse my language."

"I've seen that roan before," Ashley commented. She recognized the rider. "It's the bounty hunter, Kent Ewal, and it appears to be one of the Shoshone from Cougar's Paw camp. I remember his face, but I don't remember his name."

"They all look alike to me. I can't tell one from another," Dr. Bath replied absentmindedly. "Filthy savages."

Ashley stopped in her tracks and faced the doctor. Her eyes were filled with fire. "It is obvious you haven't looked closely at the Shoshone. Are you afraid to look the Shoshone in the eye? If you did you would see that they are as unique as all of mankind. And, for your information, they are more hygienic than most white man I've met here and even in Boston. The Shoshone shaman has forgotten more about medicines and treatment than you'll ever know. Don't you remember the Shoshone brought these two men to you alive?"

Dr. Bath held his hands up in defense. "I'm new to the area. I've been raised with these built in ideas."

Ashley put her hands on her hips. "Then get rid of them, quickly."

The crowd was near to Ashley and the doctor. Ashley recognized Rufus from the ambush in Missouri. He was thinner and looked quite pale.

"Looks like you're definitely right on one account," Dr. Bath stated. "That Indian looks a lot cleaner than the vermin riding next to him."



“He’s the man that shot my husband,” Ashley hissed. She was full of a rage she didn’t know she was capable of. The only thought in her mind was to see that man suffer horribly. She wanted justice, but she wanted vengeance more.

Kent led Rufus’ horse slowly through the crowd. He saw Grady’s wife standing to the side of the street with a well-dressed man. He looked at the beautiful woman and saw she was staring at Rufus with anger he had never seen in a woman’s eyes before. She looked at him and he tipped his hat respectfully. He didn’t dare stop to talk to her or the crowd would overwhelm them.

Ashley continued to stare at Rufus as he passed. Her anger was so great she found she couldn’t move.

After the crowd had passed and the horses were stopped at the Sheriff’s office, Dr. Bath urged Ashley to the hotel restaurant. “You must eat and I’ll order a meal for your husband.”

Ashley walked into the hotel and was greeted by her sister Alyson holding Ayden.

The little boy was bright red from screaming.

“He’s having a temper fit,” Alyson explained. “I put him on the floor for just a moment. He crawled quickly to Mama’s book and started chewing the pages. Of course I removed him from the book.”

Ashley needed the visual picture of her son to raise her from her dark thoughts. She took Ayden into his arms and began soothing him with her warm hugs and soft voice. “My little darling, already you show your interest in books. We shall have to make certain you are well educated.”

Alyson had also been a blue mood. Her sister’s jest helped cheer her.

“Are you hungry, Alyson?” Ashley inquired between the kisses she bestowed upon her son. “I would enjoy your company for breakfast.”

“I was just calming Ayden before Mamma and Papa joined me for breakfast. I’m pleased you will be joining us. Grady is better?”

“He’s improved. Dr. Bath is ordering a light meal for him. Grady is a proud man. I felt it would be best if I allow him to eat his first meal with the Doctor’s help. I am also quite tired and believe I should get a good night’s rest. I have missed holding my son.”

“Your son has missed you,” Alyson agreed taking her sister’s arm. She silently thought about her future and her own need to hold



her child in her arms. She wanted to be a mother very much. Seeing her sister's child was her reason for leaving the East to visit. She missed visiting with her own true love on his rare weekends in Connecticut near West Point. She would take the train to Danbury and visit with her cousin. Charles would ride there from West Point and they would spend a secret holiday together. Alyson knew his parents were against their match. She knew his parents had already planned a marriage match with the daughter of an elite southern family, but she and Charles loved each other. She missed Charles and penned a letter to him everyday they were in Nevada. The wonderful part of this trip was that her father was softening on his attitudes about things, including their match. Harold was learning people were not always what he believed or were told they were. At first Harold believed financiers were liars and cheats. Audrey's husband proved him wrong. He believed all Irish men were drunken never do wells. Grady proved him wrong. He had believed the stories of the savage heathen Indians until he met Cougar's Paw, Morning Song, and the other Shoshone living on Grady's land. Gus had mellowed the stubborn Brit quite a bit. There was a good chance Harold would ease his prejudice against Southerners attending West Point. Harold still despised Southern Slavers, but not all Southerners believed in slavery. Her Charles was one of those Southerners. If Charles had his way, his family plantation would have paid their workers. Such an attitude didn't sit well with his neighbors or his parents.

Alyson and Ashley had just taken their seats when Margaret and Harold appeared in the restaurant. Behind them were Morning Song and Cougar's Paw dressed in stylish Eastern Clothes.

Morning Song was wearing a red striped pink silk day dress with full hoops. The dress was slightly off the shoulder. Her hair was coiffed perfectly in the new style with ringlets. Morning Song had a lighter complexion than most Shoshone and could easily pass for a tanned pioneer white woman.

Cougar's Paw had pulled his long hair back and was tucked inside the starched collar of his shirt. The woolen gray suit made Cougar's Paw look quite distinguished. Unfortunately, Cougar's Paw had strong Shoshone features. His face was sharp and angular with high cheekbones. His coloring was a deep reddish brown.





Chapter 24

The headwaiter stopped Cougar's Paw at the door. "We don't serve savages in this establishment."

A tall powerful man with a muscular barrel chest appeared behind the couple. "Who is objecting?"

The headwaiter stepped back to look at the strong menacing man. "My customers might object."

"Might?" growled Kent. "I surely don't. I doubt the lovely ladies and gentleman over there would object." Kent pointed to the Stuarts and Ashley. "I'm sure the little toddler wouldn't mind at all." Kent looked menacingly at the few other customers in the restaurant. "Any of you object if my friends here dine with me?"

Everyone quickly shook his or her heads.

"See there," Kent chuckled to the waiter. "No one seems to mind my friends joining me for dinner. Go find us a nice table."

Harold stood up from the table and motioned the waiter, "Please bring them to our table for dinner. We had planned for them to be our guests. The bounty hunter is welcome as well."

Alyson was shocked. "You know that man, Papa?"

"Certainly, he and Firestorm saved our lives," Harold informed his daughter. He rose from the table and walked to greet Kent with a warm handshake. "Jolly good to see you, again. It gives me the time to give you a proper thank you for saving my life and Grady's."

"I'm glad to see your wound wasn't too serious," Kent responded taking Harold's hand. "How is McGillinen doing?"

"He's improving," Harold answered returning to the table and pulling a chair for Morning Song. "The lad had lost a lot of blood and suffered with fever, but he is doing better."

Kent took a seat next to Margaret after the waiter presented a chair and new setting at the table for him. He sat directly across from Ashley.



The waiter presented the choices for supper and after everyone had placed their orders Ashley found her voice. Kent Ewal was intimidating, but she wanted to thank him for finding her husband and bringing in the blackguard who shot him. "I wish to also extend my thanks to you for saving my husband and bringing the criminal to justice."

Kent's head snapped up. "You are his wife?"

"Why yes," Ashley replied with surprise. "And this is our son, Ayden."

"Nice name, Ayden," Kent quickly countered. This was the woman in the street. He had wondered what that look of rage in her eyes meant. He knew what it meant now. It was rage at the man who had back shot her husband. Kent was also disappointed. He was hoping their meeting was an act of fate. He was attracted to the woman. Of course that attraction ended when he learned she was a married woman. Kent would never be unfaithful to a wife and he certainly would not want an unfaithful wife. He realized immediately that this woman was in love with her husband. "Unusual name, Ayden."

"He's named after my husband's father," Ashley beamed proudly.

"And he likes books like his mother and grandmother," Alyson interjected jovially. "At least he likes to chew them."

The laughter rolled around the table and put everyone at ease. Alyson was always good at making everyone feel comfortable.

"Irish name, Ayden," Kent mentioned sipping a cup of hot coffee the waiter poured for him.

"Yes, it is," Harold confirmed. "My fine British daughter fell in love with an Irishman. What was there for me to do?"

"I am an American who fell in love with an American," Ashley quipped cheerfully. "And I gave birth to an American grandson for you."

"That you did, my princess. That you did," Harold chirped proudly. "A fine book chewing grandson he is." Harold reached for Ayden and took him in his arms.

Little Ayden was quite happy in his grandfather's arms until Gus appeared in the restaurant and walked to the table. Ayden immediately squirmed in Harold's arms until Gus scooped him up.



"This is Gus," Ashley introduced. "He's a member of our family."

Kent extended his hand to Gus and Ayden watched the giant warily. "Good to meet you, Gus."

Gus took Kent's hand. "You're the bounty hunter that found Harold and Grady. I heard you brought in that vermin larvae back shooter."

"I did."

"You're better than a typical bounty hunter," Gus stated.

"It pays the bills."

"You're more than that. You intend to do this the rest of your life?" Gus pursued.

"I did cow punching since I was twelve. It's little pay, long hours and hard work. I got tired of it and found out tracking bad guys paid a lot better," Kent shared. He didn't know why he revealed all of that since he was a private sort of man. This Gus was penetrating in a strange sort of way.

"You're bred to be a lawman," Gus announced. "This territory needs a good lawman. I'll see to it that you are the Federal Marshall here."

The women were stunned. Even Ashley who was used to Gus's unusual ways was surprised. Harold was lost for words.

Kent rubbed his thick mustache. "How do would you manage that?"

"I'm a personal friend of the territorial governor. He owes me a big for a favor I've never collected on, yet," Gus chuckled. "I'd be doing both of us a favor in reality. We need you here in Ely, and this territory needs a man like you."

"Pay ain't too good," Kent countered.

"Pay is steady, no hills and valleys," Gus quipped with a snort. He loved bantering with people. He would contact the territorial governor by wire tomorrow. Kent Ewal was a marshal in the making or his name wasn't Gus. Gus's gut instincts had always worked for him.

Conversation turned to discussing the food after it was served.

Kent was contemplating the security of a steady job. He did enjoy working for the law and bringing outlaws to justice. It gave him more than a monetary reward. He felt good about himself. He was especially feeling good about bringing Rufus to the hangman. A



backshooter shouldn't be allowed to die quickly. A backshooter needed to know that fear of the strangulating hanging death. His thoughts were morbid for a dinner table. This was another reason Kent preferred to keep to himself.

While the group waited for dessert, Ashley brought up Rufus once again. "Where will you be taking the man who shot my father and husband?"

"I'll take him back to St. Louis. He's wanted for murder there. I'll collect my reward and Rufus will be brought to justice."

"Horrible man," Harold noted. "Foulest of mankind, a back shooter."

"Are you traveling alone with him?" Margaret asked worriedly. She was concerned for Kent Ewal's safety with Rufus. "Wouldn't you be afraid to sleep, even if he were tied up?"

"Well, Ma'am. I couldn't agree with you more," Kent replied. "I'll be accompanied by two deputy sheriffs and we'll meet a deputy marshal in St. Joe's. We'll take turns keeping guard."

That remark comforted Ashley. She didn't think she could sleep a wink if there were a chance Rufus might escape.

"Do you have any idea why Rufus wanted to kill Grady?" Alyson blurted. She hadn't understood the reasoning of killing an innocent man to bring Grady to him. She couldn't fathom such thinking.

"It seems Grady offended Rufus by foiling one of his murderous robberies. He also fancied taking Mr. Grady's pretty wife as his own," Kent replied reluctantly. Still, he felt the family had a right to know.

Alyson gasped and held her hand over her heart. She looked to her sister.

Ashley felt compelled to tell the truth. "It's true. Rufus was one of the men planning to kill us and steal our money and belongings on our journey home. Gus and Grady tried to keep it from me, but I knew they planned on using me and then selling me off."

Harold looked to Gus with horror.

"It's like she said," Gus concurred. "We foiled them pretty well. I had no idea the vermin had followed us all the way here."

"Actually he didn't follow you. His gang was imprisoned and he received an offer as a hired gun for a man in Carson City. He accidentally ran into Grady at a livery outside of Carson. He found out



who Grady was and things fell into place for his revenge,” Kent informed. “He’s given me a merry chase. It’s time for him to pay his dues.”

“The evil in men will always cost them,” Cougar’s Paw stated wisely.

“Truer words are rarely spoken,” Harold grumbled. “Our dessert is here. Let’s stop this conversation and enjoy our sweets.”

Kent, Harold, Cougar’s Paw, and Gus went out to the boardwalk to enjoy smoking good cigars. Margaret, Alyson, Morning Song, and Ashley returned to Ashley’s hotel room with a sleepy Ayden. Margaret and Morning Song were engaged in a deep conversation. The two women sat upon the divan completely involved in their discussion.

“Would you help me put Ayden down?” Ashley asked her sister. This was the opportunity to talk to her sister privately. The two had always been close and Ashley felt her sister was suffering from doldrums. She thought she knew what was the cause, but wanted to give Alyson an opportunity to discuss it. Both sisters were aware that their lives would be taking different paths and soon would see little of each other.

“He’s an angel,” Alyson cooed lovingly. She adored her nephew. She hoped her own children would be as sweet and beautiful.

While Ashley washed, powdered, and diapered her son she opened the conversation. “Do you want to share with your sister what is troubling you?”

“I’ve received a post from Charles. He misses me as much as miss him,” Alyson answered while she put Ayden’s nightdress on him.

“There’s more to it, isn’t there?” Ashley pursued placing the rubber sheet under her son and on top of his bundling blanket.

Alyson removed the warmed milk bottle from the hot water and tested it on her wrist. “Yes, there is more to it,” Alyson sighed handing the bottle to Ashley.

Ashley took the bottle and her blanket wrapped son to the rocking chair. There she took her seat and began rocking as Ayden savored his evening bedtime bottle. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Alyson sat on the bed and pressed her forehead to the bedpost. “Charles’s mother came to visit him. She brought Diana with her. Charles was smothered by his mother and her choice of wife for him.”



“And you’re bound here with your sister, hundreds of miles away,” Ashley finished for her sister. “It’s hard to be so far away knowing your beau is being descended upon by a willful mother and a husband hunting belle.”

Alyson chuckled at her sister’s description of her future mother in law. She needed that little humor. “Yes, that about covers it. I miss Charles desperately, but most of all I’m too far away to give a bit of a battle to the beautiful southern belle, Diana.”

“Posh, you are too beautiful to be worried about a southern milksop. Have you met this Diana? What does Charles say about her?”

Alyson blushed offering her sister a small smile. “Diana is the epitome of a Southern Belle. She is beautiful, delicate as fine porcelain, and dumber than a cow.”

Ashley’s eyes widened. Ayden had just fallen asleep. She didn’t want to wake him with the laughter she held inside. “Alyson, I’ve never heard you speak like that before.”

Alyson could barely contain her own humor. “Charles’s description.”

“It would seem you have nothing to worry about with Charles,” Ashley offered rising to place Ayden in his cradle located near her bed.

“Charles and I are very much in love, but with his mother interfering, I am quite worried,” Alyson sighed. “I do miss him. I would feel more comfortable if I were closer.”

“You really want to return home,” Ashley guessed correctly.

“I’ve already spoken to Mamma,” Ashley confessed. “Papa is softer towards accepting a Southerner. He realizes Charles doesn’t believe in the practice a’tall.”

“I understand your wanting to return home,” Ashley replied. “I can’t imagine being separated from my Grady. I think I proved the point.”

“Deed you did,” Alyson agreed. “You proved it very well. It is good for me. Papa has changed for it. He’s changed for the better. Papa is less subjective to old ideals and prejudices. This grandson you gave him has also opened his mind.”

“Papa softened a little with Audrey’s son,” Ashley included.

“He does get soft around his grandsons. I really want to have my own son, but it still will be a while since Charles wants to finish



West Point. He also wants a post in Washington City before we marry.”

“And if he isn’t posted to Washington City?”

“Charles has been posturing since he entered West Point last year. There is no doubt in my mind that Charles will achieve everything he sets out to get.”

“For certain. He meets with you only last year, you both fall madly in love with each other. You begin visiting Mama’s cousin on a monthly basis to see Charles, and he gets you to promise to wait for him for another three years,” Ashley chuckled softly. “Yes, Charles does get what he wants. Promise to write me often.”

Alyson reached over to her sister and hugged her. “We are and always will be very close.”

The next morning Margaret and Harold announced that they would be returning to the East next week. It was time for them to return home. Ashley knew part of the reason was their concern for Alyson’s melancholy over her separation from Charles Jameson. Regardless of his gruff and stubborn attitudes, Harold loved his daughters to distraction and hated for them to be unhappy.

When Ashley and Morning Song visited Grady after breakfast they found him cleaned, shaved, and dressed. Doctor Bath had declared him strong enough for a wagon ride home to Geneva’s Hope.

Grady rose from the chair and walked slowly to Ashley. “I’m ready to go home.”

Ashley looked at Dr. Bath nervously. Her husband was acting strong, yet he still looked pale. “Can we return to Geneva’s Hope?”

“He’s stubborn and healing. Yes, but he cannot ride a horse. He must be content to ride on a wagon, and he must rest at least two more weeks before he even thinks about returning to his normal life. I will ride out to the ranch every few days to check up on him, but I’ve already talked to Cougar’s Paw,” Dr. Bath answered with a grin. “I’ve been promised your husband is going to have a Shoshone nursemaid.”

“What?” Grady blustered.

“Ignore him,” Ashley laughed. “He’ll get used to a nursemaid.”

“The hell I will,” Grady growled. “Let’s go home and get away from this blood letter.”



“I’ll get the wagon ready,” Ashley stated turning toward the door.

“Already done,” Gus announced holding Ayden in his arms. “The wagon is waiting outside with yer Ma and Pa. Cougar’s Paw and Morning Song are saddled and waiting. I’ll be riding along side and carrying my boy.”

Ashley shook her head. Gus couldn’t love Ayden more if he was Gus’s blood child. Her son was so lucky to be adored by so many people. She knew she would have more children and hoped they would enjoy this loving environment. She had grown up in such a place with wonderful siblings. She hoped it would be the same for her children. After all, that is why Geneva’s Hope was being built and developed. It would be not only a haven for her family, but for all the people that lived there in peace with the beautiful land. Geneva’s Hope would be their family legacy. The only obstacle would be conquering the evil and greed surrounding them with the power of good and love. She would work on that with Grady. How she loved her husband. They were born to be together. She would make certain her husband no longer left her sight for longer than an hour or two.



Epilogue

"Is too!"

"Ain't"

"I'm gonna sock you unless you give that back to me!"

"Go ahead. Cain't hurt me. I'm bigger than you are!" Ryan teased Ayden.

"The bigger they are, the harder you fall," Ayden shouted charging Ryan.

Ayden managed to push Ryan down with all his muscle and the element of surprise.

Ryan pushed Ayden up easily and landed a small fist on Ayden's shoulder.

"Give it back," Ayden ordered grabbing at carved wooden soldier. "Grandpa Gus gave that to me."

"Gave it to me," Ryan argued holding on to it.

"You broke yours!" Ayden countered swinging at Ryan's chest.

"Did not," Ryan growled punching his older brother. "You broke yours and took mine."

Grady had enough watching his six-year-old son, Ayden and his four-year-old son, Ryan. "That's enough, boys. Keep this up and one of you will sport a shiner. That would upset Mamma, and I can't have that."

"But, Ryan took my soldier that Grandpa Gus gave me," Ayden complained.

"He broke his. This is mine," Ryan countered taking another swing at his brother.

Grady grabbed Ryan's shirt collar. "That's enough, Ryan. I remember your soldier was carrying a rifle. This one has a musket." He grinned at his middle son. At four years old, Ryan was almost the same size of his six-year-old brother. Ryan looked so much like his own big brother Ryan it was uncanny. Ryan McGillinen was a large barrel chested mountain of a man that people feared and respected back in Ireland. His own son, Ryan would be the same impression here in America. Ayden was more like his namesake, Grady's father.



He was the thinker, the smart one with an even temper and a quick smile, but just as dangerous in more ways when than one when angered. He was so proud of these two boys.

Ashley had given him another son, Dwayne who was now two years old. Grady was proud of this son as well. He was a scraper, but he was extremely handsome even at such a young age.

"You sure, Pa?" Ryan asked reluctantly turning over the carved soldier to his older brother.

"I'm certain," Grady answered lovingly. "Give it back to your brother. It's wrong to take things that don't belong to you, even if it is a mistake."

Ryan pouted, but returned the soldier. "Now I don't have one. The other one is broke. Bet that mean Dwayne broke it."

"Well, maybe he did, by accident I'm sure. He's only two," Grady replied quietly. "No reason to cry over spilled milk."

"I didn't spill any milk," Ryan said defensively.

"Neither did I," Ayden quickly added.

"No boys," Grady chuckled. "It means there is no reason to worry over something that is done and over with. It means go on to something new."

"Huh?" Ryan quizzed.

"Pa's teaching us stuff again," Ayden said soberly. "We'll figure it out when we're old like Pa."

Grady stifled his laughter. "Yes, when you're old like me. Come on, boys. Let's visit your Mamma. Do you know where she is?"

"She's in her rose garden with Dwayne. She's teaching him the numbers and letters," Ayden stated knowingly. "Mamma wants us to be smart like her. Too bad you're to dumb, Ryan."

Ryan turned around and slammed a fist into Ayden's stomach. "Not as dumb as you. Ha! Caught you when you weren't looking."

"Boys, that is enough. If you hit each other one more time today I'm going to tell your Mamma. You know what that means."

Ryan groaned.

"We'll be lectured," Ayden answered seriously. "I'd rather get switched. It doesn't hurt as much and doesn't last as long."

"Then behave and I won't tell your Mamma about this little scuffle."



Ashley was sitting on a marble stool holding Dwayne in one arm and a slate in another. Dwayne was concentrating on the slate and chewing on a piece of chalk when his father and brothers arrived in the Rose Garden.

Geneva's Hope ranch home was completed and filled with life and love. The one thing Ashley had wanted was her own rose garden and Grady made certain she had the finest rose garden this side of the Mississippi River. He even hired a full time gardener to take care of it. Ashley's favorite rose was the large red perfumed rose. The garden was filled with the large red roses. This was the place Ashley always took her children when instructing them. She could also be found here in the evening after the children were put to bed for her quiet time. Grady would smoke his cheroot or cigar in the front of the ranch after dinner. He would then find Ashley in the garden. They would talk for a while and share the day as well as plans for the next day. Together they would leave the garden and go to their bedroom to make love or just hold each other until they slept.

Dwayne looked up and saw his father approach. "Papa, papa!" he gurgled wiggling from his mother's arms.

Grady bent down and opened his arms to his son. He scooped him up and put Dwayne on his broad shoulders. Dwayne was delighted.

Grady sat next to Ashley and gave her a kiss on her cheek. He put Dwayne down on the ground next to his brothers. "Go in the house and ask Grace if you can have one of her cookies. Ayden, take your little brother Dwayne with you."

"Tell Ryan to wait for us, or he'll eat all the cookies," Ayden complained.

"Ryan, wait for your brothers," Grady ordered light heartedly.

"They are such good boys," Ashley beamed. "Gus would have been so proud. I still feel him watching over us."

"It's hard to believe he's gone," Grady agreed. "Still he left this world they way he hoped. It was a quick heart attack in his sleep."

"We didn't even guess anything was wrong," Ashley reminisced. "He was so active with the boys that night."

"He loved our boys as his own blood," Grady said lovingly stroking a loose curl from his Ashley's hair.



“They are his blood, in a way,” Ashley stated. “I’m glad the boys had a chance to know such a great man. Who would have known he was such a well born, wealthy, well educated man.”

“He fell in love with nature and followed his heart,” Grady shared in memory. “He was nearly destroyed when his wife was murdered. That’s when I met him. We helped each other grow and make this beautiful haven.”

“And I am so lucky to be a part of it,” Ashley sighed. “He got to know our boys, but I regret he won’t meet our little girl.”

Grady took Ashley’s chin between his thumb and forefinger forcing her to look into his eyes. “Little girl? What are you telling me, Ashley?”

“I’m enceinte. This darling McGillinen will be a girl,” Ashley smiled happily. “I know it.”

“I’d love a little girl, just as wonderful as her mother,” Grady approved and pulled Ashley into his embrace.

“She’ll be a McGillinen,” Ashley chuckled. “Through and through. I’d like to name her after our mothers.”

“You’re that sure?”

Ashley nodded. “What do you think of Kerry Margaret?”

“I love my little girl already.”

“And Geneva’s Hope will belong to her. It’s the way of the Shoshone, and my way,” Ashley predicted.



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